Peace of Mind

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Peace of Mind

by Marwana

Summary

Part two of three: Will's part. Sequel to Necessity of Connections.

"Living well is the best revenge" George Herbert
When he is released from the BSHCI, he decided to break all contact with Hannibal Lecter. He still lives in Wolf Trap, and he still works (part time) for the FBI Academy, he just does not want to deal with either Lecter or Jack. Why would he lower himself to keep in contact with individuals who see him as a tool or a means of entertainment at best, or a murderer or dinner at worst? Why play according to the rules of others who care little for you as an individual?
Neither give him a choice in the matter, however, and living well and fully for himself is tricky when dealing with certain forceful individuals.
AU from Yakimono onwards.

Story is finished and will be updated every weekend.

Notes

This one will have quite some direct interaction between Hannibal and Will. Enjoy!

Part 1 of 7
1 Will
2 First Strike (to be posted in the weekend of the 8th of July)
3 - spoiler -
4 Second Strike
5 The cabin
6 - spoiler -
7 Three Strikes Law

See the end of the work for more notes

Will

Being out of the absolute *hell* hole of a prison would have felt great, if it were not for the fact that it had been Jack Crawford who had picked him up. The moment he had seen him stand there, hat being turned over and over in his hands, he had considered requesting to be led towards the back entrance. However, he would never even consider asking Chilton for anything ever again, so confronting the obstinate FBI agent head-on had been his only option.

It might be a hospital that the inept psychiatrist ran on paper and in name, but it was just another decaying prison, albeit one which held mentally *ill* criminals. Criminals the keeper of the keys could experiment on legally, who could be held under terrible circumstances because the government was too afraid and too disgusted to check the conditions they lived in, and who could earn Chilton a sizable income in the form of book royalties alone. Criminals had no rights, after all.

He had forced Chilton to destroy and recant everything he had or had published on him the moment he had been told he had been found innocent. Not 'not guilty', but truly innocent. The 'or else' had been heavily implied and Chilton had assured him he would. He gave him two weeks before he sicced a bunch of lawyers on him. He had never liked the oily, greedy, failed excuse of a psychiatrist and he trusted him even less. He had no doubt that Chilton would not, in fact, destroy or retract everything.

This dislike and distrust had been the reason why he had been forced to deal with Crawford, minutes after he had collected his few belongings – his now dead phone, his equally dead watch, his wallet, some bits and pieces he had had in his pockets – and had been officially allowed to walk away a free man.

Luckily, Crawford had been in no mood for small talk, or making excuses for his own behaviour and role in his physical and mental decline. In that moment, he really couldn't bring himself to deal with the emotions of others, and the head of the Behavioural Science Unit had always been so very loud.

The ride to wherever he had been taking him had been spend in silence and he had been more than content to watch nature flash by as they drove. He had felt the glances Crawford had shot him from the corner of his eyes, but he had ignored those with his new-found experience of tuning everything out.

He had been, after all, just another attraction to gawk at in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminal Insane. Lecter had been his worst gawker as he had wanted to *engage* with him and play some game of cat and mouse with him. That had been the one time, in his entire stay there, that he hadn't regretted asking Chilton for something.

After a unknown amount of time the older agent had stopped by a lone, isolated cabin in a nice woody area. He had admired his surroundings as he had stepped out of the FBI supplied vehicle. He had been able to see himself living there, though the cabin itself was too small for

his dogs. It was peaceful and quite, and the nearest main road was at least half an hour away. Shame it had been turned into a location tarnished by *him*.

The inside had been emptied out of everything of worth by the investigators, and while he had gotten some insight thanks to the pictures Crawford had forced on him, there had been little he could add beyond the warning that all evidence they would find would lead away from the actual culprit: Hannibal Lecter.

In that brief moment, he had been able to see a future path of action. Lecter had freed him from his incarceration for some reason. It might be boredom, it might be companionship, it might be his insight, it might be the fact that even with his encephalitis he had *seen* him. He doubted Lecter himself fully knew the reason, and he could use that against him. After all, he had promised him vengeance.

He could easily integrate himself in the life of the psychiatrist, offer him his friendship, offer him understanding, *manipulate* him, and gather enough evidence to lock him away. He had easily seen the steps he had to take, the victims he had to make, the lies he had to tell… and the damage he had to cause to himself along the way. He would loose important pieces of himself, and it would change him irrevocably. In the worst case, it might even lead to his death.

And all that, for what? For uprooting Lecter's life? If he was quick enough to block any plans of escape, for potentially locking him away? To give Crawford the satisfaction of catching one of the most prolific serial killers currently active? His own revenge?

It wasn't worth it. He might not be as big a fan of poetry as some other individuals he could name, but a sentence from George Herbert had come to mind: living well is the best revenge. That particular poet might have meant it in a pious and moral way, but even taken out of context it was still a better way to deal with his current situation than anything else.

He would live his life for himself, not for others.

He had ordered Crawford to bring him home after he had gotten that epiphany. Crawford had tried to get him to commit to helping him catch Lecter, but he kept mum. He would deal with the Lithuanian on his terms.

oOo

He had sent Alana a text message the moment his phone had charged its battery enough to turn on. He had noticed that his entire voicemail was filled with messages and that he had missed numerous calls, but he paid them no mind for the time being. He still didn't feel like talking to anyone, the presence of Crawford that very same day had already been too much, but he missed his dogs desperately.

His next action was to block the number of anyone he didn't want to be contacted by. The very first ones to go were all numbers he had of Lecter. Crawford was a close second.

Alana responded about an hour later, also by text. He ignored all of her pointed questions and remarks and they settled on the afternoon in two days. Considering the attitude towards him

that shimmered through her messages, combined with the fact that she had sent him messages instead of just calling, showed him enough. He decided that he wouldn't be the one to pick them up. He had felt enough judgement, hatred, annoyance, disdain and dislike from others throughout the last couple of weeks, he didn't want to feel it from someone he had had feelings for now that he was free.

He used his two days of silence to clean up his house, fix his car, hire a couple of competent lawyers to squeeze out money from wherever they could, caved to the begging of the FBI Academy to return parttime, contacted the George Washington University for the job offer they had made him months ago, and to newly buy everything that had been destroyed by the FBI during the investigation. Most of it, he did online. He wasn't up to dealing with people and their petty prejudice.

His dogs, when they were dropped of two days later, were ecstatic to see him. They danced and hopped around him and they kept begging for his attention. He managed to extract himself long enough from them to thank the two ladies who brought his dearest companions back to him, a large smile on his face and his heart lighter than it had been in months. Both women hadn't seem to recognise him, or they hadn't cared, as they had smiled kindly at both him and his dogs. They had complimented him on how well they were trained and how easy they had been to handle. He tipped them generously.

It had taken three days since he had been freed, but buried underneath seven dogs, he was finally *home*.

oOo

With his immune system no longer trying to destroy his own brain, and with no one prodding and picking at his mind, he finally had the time, the space and the silence to figure out who Will Graham was and what he wanted.

His dogs, that had been an easy one. His likes and dislikes were also easy to determine. He liked tying flies, reading, fixing motors, the land and woods surrounding his house, fishing, taking long walks with or without his dogs and his scientific research into forensics. He disliked loud and pushy people, small spaces and being boxed in, crowds, being overworked and ignored, his wishes and opinion being disregarded, psychiatrists and everyone else who wanted to dig around in his mind, and being sick.

He longed for *human* companions, romantic or platonic. But, after some contemplation on his second night at home, he painfully realised that in the recent years he only had two people he had actually, truly been able to call his friends. Only two individuals who hadn't cared about his lack of eye contact, his bluntness, his strange attitude towards the world, and his awkwardness. One of them had been gruesomely murdered at the hands of the second one, the second one was a manipulative serial killer who had been toying with him and his health and who had made him take the fall for his murders. Lecter had shown himself to be an insidious, uncaring individual who preferred duplicity and his own amusement over a genuine connection with someone else.

Oh, he had other people he might have given that label to in the past, but in hindside he had never been able to just be himself around them. Even Alana, who he had been crushing on

and who was beautiful, kind and kissable, had been no more than a friendly acquaintance at best. He had never been able to create a true connection with her. She had been both hot and cold towards him, but she had never let him come too close or too comfortable around her.

He had hoped to create something of a connection to Abigail, something beyond the fact that he had saved her life and her resentment for his hand in the death of her father. Her disappearance and possible murder made that impossible, however.

He missed both of them terribly, and he grieved the loss of those formerly innocent but important connections for every second of every day. He would never get them back. Beverly was gone, and he was indirectly the reason for her death. Abigail had never really warmed up to him, but as he had mentioned to Lecter before, he had felt responsible for her. He had never wanted to become a father figure to her, but he had hoped that she would come to see him as something akin to an uncle-figure over time.

Currently, he was alone and stuck with a reputation as the man who *didn't* kill all those people. Not the best start to create connections. It had been a bitter pill to swallow when he realised that his loneliness and his lack of connections had been Lecter's intention from the very start.

God, how had he ever missed the signs of the gaslighting and the forced isolation and division from others?

The worst thing was that Lecter's remarks concerning his care for his life over that of others, his offers of food and to care for his dogs, and his gravitation towards him whenever they had been in a room together had seemed so very real, so very genuine. How could he have missed that the friendship was only ever one-sided and that he was being used? Some profiler he was.

It had been a good thing he had nothing alcoholic in his house during those two days without his dogs, because he had no doubt that he would have drunkenly, *angrily* called the absolute bastard to rant and rave at him. He had no idea where that would have led him, but likely nowhere healthy.

Living well was difficult when one of the few people you felt truly and completely connected to was the person who had most grievously hurt you through sheer betrayal.

It was during those two days alone that he firmly decided that he would stop working for the BSU, he would try and get along with his fellow teachers and his students, and he would keep those he had considered his friends and close acquaintances *before* at a distance. If they even wanted him around.

oOo

They just wouldn't leave him be.

Jack, *Crawford*, had dropped in on one of his classes sometime during his third week to try and convince him to return to the BSU. After he had made it very clear that he would only help him *if* he had the time on the Mondays and Tuesdays during normal business hours, *if* he

was in his office, *if* he was not grading work for the Academy or helping his students, *if* he accepted that he was no longer willing to go out in the field, and *if* he gave him a consultancy contract that meant he would be paid a flat fee per case.

He begrudgingly unblocked his number after he had signed his new consultancy contract.

But Crawford kept on pushing. He would show up in his office and *demand* that he would immediately look at the case he brought him and tell him what he was looking at even though it was very obvious that he was grading essays. He would mail him files and order him to respond, even or especially on days he wasn't even working for the FBI. He would call him at odd hours on his phone to rudely ask for his input, only to start shouting at him when he firmly told him no. It had felt very satisfying to hang up on him every time he tried, right up until it wasn't. He had been very tempted to block his number again, so recently after he had unblocked it too, but as he had signed a consulting contract with Jack as his main contact person he couldn't.

He learned to put his phone on airplane mode after 9 o'clock in the evenings the first time he called him at some ungodly hour, and he finally blocked his number again after the third time he tried to call him outside of his set business hours and tried to yell at him. He informed the FBI HR immediately of the change and requested a new, primary contact person.

On top of that, Jack kept pushing him to help out with the Chesapeake Ripper case. He wanted absolutely nothing to do with that case. Lecter was very obviously the perpetrator, but there had never been and there never would be any evidence on any of the crime scenes. Lecter was too careful and too experienced for *that*. He wouldn't be surprised if this wasn't even his first monicker either. They surely weren't his first *kills.* All evidence they might find would either be circumstantial at best, or lead away from the Lithuanian. He was neither willing to deal with the psychiatrist, nor was he willing to act as a honey pot to trap him.

The straw that broke the camel's back had been when the FBI agent had also had the sheer gall to drop by his house, once again after his working hours, to forcefully invite him to have dinner with the doctors Lecter and Bloom. As if the first hadn't made his life a living hell in the last couple of months, and as if the second wasn't actively going out of her way to either ignore him or avoid him. He had firmly told him no, threatened to stop working with him at all if he kept ignoring his set conditions, and closed the door in his face.

It had been his absolute pleasure to hand him over to HR after that particular stunt.

Lecter, on the other hand, was even harder to ignore, let alone get rid of. In the first two weeks alone, the older man had left him multiple voicemails, just to *check up* on him and to request his presence for his *sessions* or to invite him for dinner. After about two weeks, when he hadn't picked up, called him back, or responded in any other way, he had mailed him on his FBI mail address. When *that* hadn't gotten him a reaction, he had used his private email address. And then he had started to sent him hand written letters to his home address. The hand writing had been in neat calligraphy and the paper had been thick and clearly expensive. Who even *wrote* letters these days?

He didn't read either the mails or the letters at first, but the lawsuit combined with his own curiosity had seen him open one of the letters one day and then he had seen himself forced to

read the rest. The ones he hadn't already thrown out, that was. Some had ended up in his fireplace as his anger overwrote his common sense, some had ended up in the books he had been gifted, some had been handed over to his lawyers. And he had lawyers now. That in and of itself was a strange thing to consider.

The content of all letters and emails he had received had hurt him not unlike a dagger to the heart. Not once did he believe Lecter to be genuine in what he wrote.

Even worse than the sheer amount of letters the older man sent him, was that half of the letters came with something extra. He had been too intrigued to see what a megalomanic cannibal with too much money would send him to leave them well enough alone. So he had opened the packages. The gifts had been small things at first. Some books he would have normally loved to read. Some recipes handwritten on quality stock paper that could be made in his meagre kitchen. Some fancy but natural material for his lures that he would have liked to use. It was just the person who gifted them to him that he strongly disliked and which influenced his opinion on the gifts.

He even had the material meant for his lures checked by Price to make sure it wasn't *human* material this time. That took some explaining, but the fact that the Chesapeake Ripper had triggered the procedure to set him free by murdering the judge combined with the fact that the serial killer had misused his lures helped convince the other scientist to at least take a look.

But after one ridiculously long letter in which Hannibal stated that he would give him time and space, but not leave him alone, the gifts started to become outlandish. The books became first editions or leather bound versions of classics he had mentioned enjoying instead of just hardcovers. The recipes came with rare ingredients he might need to make them. A small, square box had contained a pale green coloured tie made out of a slick feeling material with little dogs on it. One particular large package had even contained a well-fitting dress shirt in a solid blueish-grey colour made out of some heavy, quality material.

That was the one time he responded to any of the messages and letters Lecter had sent him. It was a very short mail, from his FBI mail account even, that contained only a handful of words:

Lecter,
Leave me alone.
Will

To his annoyance but not to his surprise, he not only did *not* leave him alone but he even started to visit him. How was he to forget the other man and get on with his life when he continued to try and gain his forgiveness and get back onto his positive side?

Why couldn't they just *leave him be*?

oOo

Money was flowing steadily into his savings account. Between the multiple civil cases, the hush money from the FBI, and the compensations Lounds had been forced to pay him he had

enough money to easily leave his house in Wolf Trap behind if he ever felt the need.

He might not have enough to retire completely, but he could take it a bit more easy and he could set quite a bit aside in case he needed it in the future. And it was all about that *need*, never about a *want* he might have.

He liked his work at both the FBI Academy and the George Washington University, and he liked teaching. He liked his house and what he had done with it. He liked the peace of the woods nearby, and the open fields for his dogs to roam in. He wouldn't allow Hannibal Lecter or Jack Crawford to bully him away from his own slice in the world. Moving elsewhere would count as fleeing, which would mean that they had won.

But he wanted, no *needed*, an emergency plan in case a certain someone decided to come after him again. And that is where the money came in.

Ever since he had written the standard monograph on determining time of death by insect activity, he had managed to get an annual income that let him live comfortably, set a nice amount aside for future purposes, and so he could splurge a bit if he ever wanted to. He was aware that he didn't show it, as his car was an older model and his clothes were of a decent make and quality but rarely worn by people outside of the rural areas.

With the additional money, he could pack up everything he needed or wanted to keep, buy a cabin somewhere along the coast and spend the rest of his days fixing boat and car motors and fishing without ever needing to worry about becoming as poor as he had been in his youth. If someone ever forced his hand, he could disappear out of their lives completely and they would never see him again. He could do that, if it was needed.

If they forced him to. He wasn't planning on it, but he could. And that was enough to make him rest easily at night.

oOo

Freddy Lounds' dead body had been found somewhere and of course the FBI agents on the case had immediately contacted him to know where he had been and what he had been doing on the day she had gone missing. Though he did not know or particularly care which serial killer had managed to end her existence, it had not been hard to guess that it was either something she had written, somewhere she had been, or something she had seen that had placed her on someone's hit list.

The fact that she had been murdered didn't surprise him. She lived for sensationalising the morbid and often despicable acts perpetrated by people who were either mentally ill or plain didn't care for others. She had been kidnapped by murderers before. Stammets and Gideon were just two examples. It stood to reason that the third time she was taken by a serial killer wouldn't end so fortunately for the self-declared journalist who was too often creative with the truth.

He hadn't seen the odious woman since she had tried to lie in her testimony against him, though he had been told that she had taken photos from him and had written multiple articles

about him after he had been released. That had been enough, apparently, to put him on the lists of suspects.

Never mind that he had been working at the university followed by a long, traffic jam filled trip home on the day she had disappeared, and never mind that he had had to teach on the day she had been killed and that they had closed that week with the usual Friday afternoon faculty drinks.

They would never confirm it, but he had no doubt that the fact that he had been incarcerated temporarily for the Copycat murders didn't help his case. It didn't matter if he was found to be innocent, the fact that he had fit the profile would forever haunt his steps.

He had been seen by more than enough people that the FBI agents had backed off really quickly, and that had been the end of it as far as he had been concerned.

At the time he had wondered if Hannibal had been harassed by the agents too, or if he had been a special case.

oOo

He had laughed until he had cried when he had been informed that *Frederick Chilton* of all people had been preliminary arrested and detained for the Chesapeake Ripper and the Copycat murders. It had been a good thing he had been off and at home at the time as the tears had streamed down his face and he had hiccoughed for long minutes until he had managed to breath normally again. His dogs had swarmed around him, pushing wet noses against him and barking madly in shock. It had been that, more than anything, that had calmed him down.

Even he hadn't been able to tell if they had been caused by the hilarity of the situation or if it had been sadness, anger or betrayal that were the leading emotions that had caused his outburst.

In any way, it had appeared as if Chilton was guilty. The butchered remains of Abel Gideon had been found in his basement, with parts of it missing. Cannibalised parts such as the thighs and offal of some of the other victims already prepared for consumption or cooked into *delightful* meals were also found in his freezer and refrigerator. The packaging had contained written labels with the dishes or the type of meat. The handwriting matched Chilton's to a t.

The man had been caught while he tried to flee in his car. He had been covered in blood, and he had been carrying a weapon of some kind. He had claimed that he had woken in that state, but they hadn't been able to find a single drug in his blood when they had tested him.

As he had been seen on the road away from any of the large airports or harbours and into the inland, it was assumed that he had tried to reach *him*, of all people. The FBI was of the opinion that Chilton wanted to murder him, but he didn't share that same outlook on the situation. It hadn't been that much of a surprise that the former head of BSHCI wanted to come to him. He would have been the only person within the FBI who would have instantly believed him when he said that he *wasn't* the notorious serial killer. Even Jack was at least slightly hopeful that he had his white whale.

He was, however, honestly surprised that Hannibal would make someone as arrogantly incapable as Chilton take the fall.

And make him his new scapegoat he had, successfully so. Lass had shot the blustering psychiatrist in the face when she had been confronted with him, and the evidence, both direct and circumstantial, had been *convincing*.

Chilton also fit most of the profile. He was an older, white male with surgical experience. He was established, had money, lived alone and kept odd hours, he was manipulative and self-centred, he had the space for a killing room, and he had a second car which hadn't been registered under his own name.

The main difference was his skill. The profile had stated that the Chesapeake Ripper would be successful in whatever field he had chosen to work in, and Chilton had been *squamous* and preferred talk over action. That had been the reason why he had never made it far as a surgeon and why he had changed fields. He was also just a passable cook at best, and likely not capable or willing to work with the offal found in his fridge the way the Ripper probably did. That was conveniently forgotten or ignored as just another falsehood told by an accomplished liar.

It did bring forth the question why Hannibal had chosen *Will* as his patsy when he had everything prepared for Chilton to take the blame of the murders.

oOo

After months of ignoring him, Alana was talking to him again. She seemed to have reached some kind of conclusion, somehow, and she seemed to have forgiven him the perceived transgressions. Much to his surprise and his suspicion. It had been too sudden a change in behaviour.

Her apology had been half-hearted when she had given it, and their subsequent conversations were awkward and stilted. It was clear to him that she still felt guilty about what he had said to her, and that she didn't know how to behave around him. Something between them had been ripped apart or away, and they would never go back to the friendly acquaintanceship they had had before. That did not mean that he would be rude to her, however, or ignore her when she sat down next to him during his breaks.

She had taken at least some of his words to heart, and she told him a little about herself, her state of mind, and her relationships with first Lecter and later Margot Verger when he asked after her weekend or her plans for the evening. She still treated him as a pitiful dog that might snap one day, however.

Especially her relationship with Lecter came as both a surprise and a slap in the face. However, it had also explained why she had suddenly forgiven him, and why her opinion about him had shifted back to what it had been before he had been incarcerated.

He had been aware of her divided interest in both himself and the older, more experienced doctor as she hadn't been exactly subtle about her interest in the latter. He had also seen that

the Lithuanian psychiatrist had always dismissed her flirtations, and that he had kept her at a respectful and friendly but firm distance.

He remembered the discussion he had once had with Lecter during the early days of their acquaintanceship, far before he had ever considered the older man a friend, concerning relationships. The doctor had made it very clear that he preferred his brief dalliances. He *longed* for a true bond with someone, but he had yet to encounter someone who could see beyond and stay behind the tailored veil of an educated, wealthy socialite he used while in the presence of the majority of his acquaintances. He had told him that he had only met a handful of individuals who had the potential to keep up with him and to see him for who he truly was, but most of them had turned out to be disappointments. At that time, he confessed, he had yet to make a deep, meaningful connection with another human being.

He sometimes wondered, in the darkest hours of the night when he had trouble sleeping, what end goal Lecter wanted to reach with the sheer amount of attention he had started to pay *him*. Was he still looking for that mystical connection he had spoken so yearningly of, that individual who could join him behind his veil? If so, what had changed since that day that he believed *him* to fit the bill?

The timing of the start of the affair Alana and Lecter had was incredibly suspicious to him. Alana had shared multiple kisses with him a couple of weeks before his incarceration, and while she had rejected him, she had clearly been infatuated with him. That infatuation hadn't been diminished when he had first been locked away for crimes he hadn't committed. In fact, even months after he had been freed she was still somewhat sweet on him.

The fact that she had started a sexual and or romantic relationship with Lecter only a handful of weeks after they had kissed and after he had tried to get the serial killer disguised as a upstanding member of high society away from her, made her appear shallow and petty in his eyes. It seemed as if the sudden relationship was as much about Lecter needing a alibi, as it was about hurting him and showing how little influence he had on the outside world, *and* painting Alana in a negative light.

She might have known Lecter longer and she might have been as taken with the doctor as she had been with him, that did not however mean that she had to turn a blind eye to his many faults. He had believed her to be smarter than to start *dating* someone he had warned her about. The least she could have done was to wait until someone had looked into his accusation against the older psychiatrist.

He had silently wished her the best of luck, but he had made a note of her blindness and her inability to see what was right in front of her. He just didn't, *couldn't* trust her and her opinion of others ever again.

oOo

He wouldn't say that there were a lot of serials killers or that bodies had been dropping left and right in a very short period, but he had been kept busy long enough that enough strange, new cases had appeared that he had missed. Between the classes he taught at the FBI Academy, the rare cases Crawford really needed him to create profiles for, his work at the

George Washington University, and the articles he had to write in his role as researcher, he barely had the time to add those new cases to his slide decks for said classes at the Academy.

So, when he finally had a handful of hours on a rather dreary Monday, he chose to lock his door and to go through the dossiers he had been given.
Most of the dossiers contained cases that had been straightforward and had one single offender who had gone serial, murdered their three or four victims and were caught. Neither the BSU nor he had been needed. Those were not interesting enough to add to his lessons as killers of that type were a dime a dozen, so he put the dossiers aside.

However, there were a handful of cases where the *BSU* had been needed and he had been either too busy to help them or he had provided some insight at the very start of the murderer's career as a serial killer.

One of them had been the killer the press had named the Tarot Tormentor. He had only briefly given his input when the third victim had dropped, but he had only had enough time to note the shapes the bodies had been posed in, and to provide the evidence to his claims. The perpetrator had been found and shot after his sixth victim.

He curiously leafed through the file, but he stopped in surprise as he noticed the name of the sixth and last victim. He had been aware that Lounds had gone missing when the Tormentor had been active, he had been asked some very pointed questions by the FBI after all though he had never connected her kidnapping to that specific killer, but he had not realised or been made aware that she had been one of his *victims*. It did explain why it had been a FBI agent he had never worked with before that had bothered him about his alibi.

Crawford's team had been in the lead for that case, but as Lounds had harassed that particular team more than any other, they had been replaced by a fresh set of eyes that had never had to deal with the flamboyant sensationalist.

He shot a brief glance at the photos of the last three victims but they showed him what he already knew. It had been an interesting case, but it didn't add anything new to his already existing material. Considering his dislike for Lounds, it would seem crude to add an illustration of her body to his slide deck.

He was about to put the material back into the folder, when something about the picture of Lounds' remains struck him as *different*. He frowned as he took the photographs out again and placed them in the correct order. It didn't take long to notice what had grabbed his attention, as everything about Lounds' case was too neat.

Her body was shaped exactly like the moon on the corresponding card within the deck and the scene had included all the little details depicted on the card, created out of most of the cut-away parts of the body. Only her left upper thigh and buttock was missing. A lot of attention had not only gone into the scene itself but also in the area around her body as it had been roughly swept clean of debris. Her hair had been neatly fanned out behind her, and any tangles it might have gained since her abduction had been brushed out. The differences were slight, but whoever had killed her, he had been meticulously and he had worked neatly. She had been his intended victim from the start, and there was nothing sexual about it.

The bodies of the other five victims had been roughly shaped in a recognisable approximate of the form on the corresponding tarot card, and the additional elements such as stars or flames had been missing. While they had been staged, no notice had been taken of the environment around them, their somewhat tangled hair had been left as it had fallen, and the removed body parts had never been found. The victims had been chosen based on their easy of access, and the murders clearly showed sexual and ritualised elements.

He opened the dossier again and quickly checked the coroner's report. The cuts on the first five victims were peri or post mortem and had been made with one single, serrated knife which had hacked more than it had cut. They had been strangled to unconsciousness or death before the killer had started to cut into them, and they had died before or immediately after the first cuts had been made. Only the parts that would have been in the way for the intended shape had been crudely removed and the perpetrator had not cared that he left rough edges in his tarot forms. His stitches were somewhat uneven and were only present where the shape would have otherwise been impossible to form.

On the other hand, and as he had expected, all incisions on Lounds were ante mortem and had been made with an extremely sharp, but still serrated knife and by someone with a steady hand who knew where the edges of the muscles could be found. Flaps of skin had been left behind so there was nearly no interruption in the shape of the moon and the stitches on her had been nearly as large as the ones on the first five victims but even and neat. She had been strangled *after* her killer had finished his surgical work on her.

Just like the Minnesota Shrike case and the corresponding copycat murder of Boyle, the differences were slight but like day and night.

The first five bodies also contained traces of the perpetrator. Partial fingerprints had been found on the bodies, blood and skin had been removed from underneath nails, and between some of the stitches hairs from someone other than the victims had been found. In some cases semen had even been found near or on the body, though penetration had not taken place. No evidence whatsoever had been found anywhere on or around the remains of Lounds.

Lounds had been killed by a copycat, and he had the feeling he knew who it had been. He would not be updating his slides after all.

oOo

The conference had been *interesting,* to say the least. He would have called it a success, but the very persistent shrinks and the overly forced socialising made it very hard to consider it as such. Lecter hadn't even been the worst of the lot, though he had been the hardest to deal with.

He had chosen one of the smaller psychiatry symposia he was invited to speak at. Not only because most people there would not have heard of him before in any way or shape, but also because normally his most ardent mind-digging stalkers would consider it *beneath* them to show up at such a *rural* event.

Only they had shown up, and the convention had moved to a larger and grander environment due to the sheer amount of therapists, psychologists and psychiatrists that had registered for

the conference. He had no doubt that most of them came for him, so he had made it very clear that he would not be talking about anything but the article he had written.

Part of it had been a rather painful topic to write about. Though no one within the BSU had believed him until they found the evidence after Ingram's untimely demise, he had almost immediately realised that poor Peter had not killed *any* of the women he had been accused of murdering. In fact, he had not directly killed a single person. The death of his case manager had been an unfortunate *accident* of all things, though Peter had certainly attributed to his death. Clark Ingram had died from a particular nasty case of sepsis, caused by the foreign material introduced into his body during his temporary imprisonment in a dead horse. He had been envious that Peter had gotten his revenge, however indirect it was, while he was still trying to live well and stay indifferent to the absolute bastard that had gotten him incarcerated.

His talk had gone well, and he had gotten some insightful questions from a handful of individuals who actually cared about the topic he had presented. He had easily dismissed the individuals who were only interested in his mind, his stint in the BSHCI, the influence of encephalitis on his way of thinking, or his work as a profiler.

He had only realised that Lecter had been present *after* he had finished his presentation and he had approached him. The room had been large, filled to the brim with people dressed in expensive suits, and the spots had been shining in his eyes. It had been easy to miss another well-dressed and well-heeled individual in the crowd. Even one as flamboyantly dressed as Lecter.

It had taken all his willpower not to lash out at him, especially because the other psychologists present would not understand his hostility. He was immensely glad for the interruption of the next speaker, but it had meant that he had to deal with Hannibal without anyone else to act as a buffer between them.

Once again, his request to be left alone was ignored as the older man kept trying to contact him. The Lithuanian had even shown up at his *home* on occasion.

oOo

Months went by like this. He easily got back into a steady rhythm, which was only broken by the visits of a very persistent Hannibal Lecter. He got his life back on the rail, people slowly started to forget about his incarceration and started to respect him for his work, and he was finally *healthy* and something close to content. He had even made some acquaintances he regularly talked to and who could appreciate his sense of humour.

He was finally living well.

It was only after everything had happened that he realised that it had been during those months that he had slowly started to use Hannibal's first name again during the rare moments his guard had been down.

First Strike

Chapter Notes

First interaction between Will and Jack after he has been released. Enjoy!

Up next week: a direct interaction between Will and Hannibal. You will have to wait and see what it is about ;)

First Strike: the Confrontation

oOo

It was barely his third week back on the job and he was still getting used to, well, everything really. He had chosen to return only partially to the FBI Academy, and he was only present on Mondays and Tuesdays. This was both to avoid certain individuals such as Crawford and Lecter, but also because he had realised that he missed the science side of forensics terribly.

While everyone might believe him to be just a forensic psychologist, he was actually a scientist at heart and he had gained multiple degrees with regard to forensic investigations. As Beverly had once remarked upon, he had written *the* standard monograph on time of death by insect activity. It had gotten him his doctorate, though he wondered how many were aware he had one.

The Thursdays and Fridays were therefore spend at the George Washington University at the Forensic Faculty as just another faculty member, working on his own research and mentoring students. On the Wednesdays he made sure to enjoy his time off with his dogs, his river to wade in and fish, his motors or his books. He set some strict boundaries on those times, and he made it known that he could not be contacted except on the Mondays and Tuesdays.

The others at Quantico, teachers and students alike, were hesitant and awkward around him when he was present. He was aware that it might last a while longer, but he made himself seem as approachable as he could. He took his breaks in the teachers' lounge, he asked the teachers after their weekend or their significant others, he met their eyes and smiled at them and he openly talked about and showed pictures of his dogs.

With the students he made sure to let them know that he had an open office every afternoon he was present from three to four, he tried to explain some of his thought processes and he kept his body language open, confident but nonconfrontational and relaxed.

He had seen some change in those around him as they slowly started to relax from the more tense stance they had held in his first week. But it was very clear to him, probably to everyone, that they had no idea how to treat him. They had all believed him to be guilty,

mainly because of the way Jack Crawford, the Guru, and Kate Purnell had condemned him. Now that it was beyond any doubt that he was innocent, they tried to determine how to handle this new, more confident and more social Will Graham.

Some of his students had actually helped him continue the experiments he had started before his encephalitis had become too much. Some of his fellow teachers had welcomed him into their fold like he was just another new face. While it made all of them uneasy, himself included, it worked for all of them and he was sure that it wouldn't take long before he was once again just another member of the teaching staff to everyone.

oOo

It was the Tuesday afternoon of his third week back at Quantico that Jack Crawford appeared in his lecture hall. He hadn't seen the older man since he had made him drop him off at his house in Wolf Trap the day he had been released. The day he had been brought towards the scene Miriam Lass had been held. The day he warned Jack that all evidence would point away from one Hannibal Lecter.

The day he had decided that he wouldn't play whatever game Lecter was playing and he wouldn't become the victim of Crawford's need to catch his white whale. He would do what he wanted, within reason.

It just appeared as if they were as not ready to let him step away.

He only became aware of Crawford's presence about forty minutes into his lecture on psychoanalysis. Ironically enough, it was the very same presentation he had given just after he had first met Hannibal Lecter.

The older man was leaning against the wall, in the shadows near the entrance, silently listening to him elaborate on how to analyse the behaviour of people based on what they left, or didn't leave, behind on a crime scene. The students hadn't noticed him yet, or he would have noticed their distraction or heard the near awed whispers that always seemed to appear around the head of the Behavioural Science Unit.

Crawford waited remarkably patiently for his class to end before he made his way towards him, not unlike that very first day he had accosted him in that very same lecture hall. As expected, the students started whispering to their fellows as soon as he was noticed. Some even pointed him out, surprisingly discretely, towards those students that had yet to spot him.

By the time Crawford had reached him, all students were aware and watching with bated breath to see what the famous Guru wanted with their blunt teacher. Though they had already packed everything away and while it meant they would be late for their next class, they stayed.

Completely unlike that very first day of his release, he kept his distance and he seemed almost unsure on how to start the conversation it was clear he wanted to have. He just stood there watching him, his hands in the pockets of his black slacks.

Will just calmly changed his slide deck from Psychoanalysing 101 to Advanced Profiling. He didn't particularly care for whatever it was that made Crawford come to him, nor was he even considering helping him out. The man had his own team consisting of trained specialists actually paid to do the job of catching the strange and violent serial killers. He didn't need another profiler, not even one who could help him find the murderer that much quicker.

In the meantime, he swiftly studied him out of the corner of his eye. The Guru seemed tired and stressed. His dark skin was oddly shallow and pale, his subdued suit was clean but rumbled and his tie was slightly crooked as if no one had bothered to lovingly straighten it for him. His dark eyes were faintly glassy and had dark circles around them. His short hair had started to grey more rapidly than ever before, but it was too short for him to notice if there was a significant decrease in the number of them. He easily read the decline of Bella's health and the stress of wanting to catch both the current killer of the week and the Chesapeake Ripper on him.

His posture was loose and confident, but hidden underneath the confidence there was something vaguely defeated and insecure present as well. It was that dissonance that made the latter jump out at him. He wondered if his students noticed and recognised the signs for what they were.

"How are you?" Crawford asked him after several long minutes. The question came out begrudgingly and awkward, as if he wasn't really used to regular chit chat. Or talking to individuals he had, indirectly, victimised. Either was possible.
"Are we doing small talk now?" he mused idly in return as he pushed his glasses slightly higher. He had yet to turn towards the other man.

Silence fell, and while it might be awkward or frustrating on Crawford's part he didn't let it bother him. It was one of the skills he had managed to train during his forced institutionalisation, the ability to not care about what others thought of him. Chilton had at least been good for that much.

He finished setting up his presentation and turned towards the older profiler. His own stance was open and relaxed, though he kept the corner of his desk between them. He noticed that the students for his next class had also made their way into the lecture room and that the students of his last class had made space for them to at least sit down and unpack their material. He decided that he would write them a note as soon as Crawford had left.

"I need your help," Crawford finally said.
"You don't," he said almost kindly, "you need to take some time off. You need to rest and you need to be with Bella. You don't need my help."

Crawford shot him an ugly look but he met those glaring eyes steadily, "what I need, is the Chesapeake Ripper behind bars and the only one with the slightest chance of getting me that evidence is you."
"You have Bloom in a perfect position," he retorted with a raised eyebrow, "she does the same thing as I do, remember."

"Except that *he* does *not* ask after her," Crawford said hotly and far too loudly as he lost partial control of his temper, "and she doesn't have your skills and knowledge. Nor your way

of thinking."
"And once again it comes back to that," he said flatly as he crossed his arms over his chest and turned away from the other male to lean back against his desk, "I am aware that people believed me to be your bloodhound. Your ultimate weapon in catching those murderers capable of such hideous or such crazed actions. Your *special* tea cup, only taken out for special guests."

His lips almost twitched at the familiar metaphor, shared with him so long ago. He supressed it, as he suppressed the memories and the flash of hurt and betrayal that came with them.

"I wasn't. I was just a convenient tool for you, to be discarded as soon as I was damaged beyond repair," he continued as if he didn't notice the way Crawford flinched before he puffed up in anger, "you claimed to be the bedrock for my perceived and aggravated instability. But all you turned out to be is loose rocks floating on quicksand. You appear to be a stable presence, but you are anything but."

"People were dying! People are dying!" Crawford near bellowed as he lost his temper fully. He slammed his flat hands on the table with a loud smacking sound that echoed through the room. He felt the impact of flesh on wood vibrate through the top of the desk. One of the hands had nearly hit him on its way down. He turned his head back to him, and eyed him expressionlessly over the rim of the black frames.

His students looked taken aback at the outburst. They had never seen the man as anything but unflappable. His current behaviour didn't match the image of the brilliant head of the Behavioural Science Unit they had created in their head.

"And people will keep on dying," he countered cooly, "don't pin the actions of the criminally insane on me. The last time you did, it cost the FBI money. And your previous attempt to use that argument with me nearly cost you your job. We both know that you cannot afford to lose the secondary benefits of this particular function."
"And you let the one who actually pinned it on you walk away scot-free?!?" Crawford exploded at him as the dig hit target, now truly enraged, "you nearly killed him, you kept yanking that bell, and now you walk away from the opportunity to get your revenge?!?"

"I didn't nearly kill him, I was locked away remember?" he deadpanned blandly, "and I am not 'letting him walk away'. He is looking for a friend, someone to join him behind his veil, someone to see the truth of him. I am taking that away from him. My indifference is far more likely to make him slip up than anything else I could possibly do."

Crawford made a muted sound of impotent rage as he stomped closer and into his space. The side of the desk must be digging into the soft flesh of his gut but he didn't seem to feel it. He kept his own arms crossed as he bodily turned back to the furious special agent. His legs were spread, but he kept his body as relaxed as he could. He was used to the rare snarling, rabid canine and Crawford was no different.

"What I especially do not want is either of you yanking my chain ever again," he articulated firmly, not in the least intimidated by the blundering rage in front of him, "the last time I let you *talk* me into the field you took, and took, and took. When I told you I no longer could be

of any use to you, you manipulated me as I spiralled downwards into sickness. And even then, you kept pulling at me. From where I am standing, you are no better than he is."

That, unlike anything else he might have said, made Crawford rear back like he had been slapped and he lost part of his threatening stance.
"I am nothing like-!" he managed to exclaim indignantly.
"Aren't you?" he told him mildly, "both of you are willing to manipulate and sacrifice those around you for your own goals. Both of you are willing to *kill* for your own sense of justice and your own moral compass. Both of you fall back to violence and intimidation the moment you are suddenly confronted in a way you hadn't prepared for."

He eyed his balled fists, his panting rage and his general lack of distance to his own person pointedly.

"I won't be the Homes to his Moriarty," he said, "but I am willing to look into any files you bring me."
That seemed to calm Crawford down.
"But," he continued loudly and unyieldingly, interrupting him before he could actually say anything, "only when I am in my office, during *normal* hours. I will *not* drop any of my classes or breaks for you. I will *not* join you in the field. I will *not* bring any files home with me. You are *not* welcome to contact me when I am not in my office here in Quantico or any other way than in person. When I am helping a student or when I am grading, you will have to wait. If it is 5 o'clock and time for me to go home, I go home. That means that you can ask me to look into cases on Monday and Tuesday between 9 in the morning and until 5 in the afternoon, *if* I am in my office and *if* I have time. That is all I am willing to offer you."

"But-," Crawford started.
"*That is all I am willing to offer you*," he enunciated steadily as his eyes bored into the dark eyes still glaring at him, "take it, or leave it."

Crawford nodded stiffly, clearly still angry with what he had been told and clearly unhappy with what he got.
"Good, now get out," he told him flatly, "I have a class to teach."

To Settle a Quarrel

Chapter Notes

Hereby the promised interaction between Hannibal and Will, nearly 6k words of Hannibal trying to get into the good graces of Will... You will have to read to find out if it works for him. Enjoy!

I got some questions about Abigail: she is not is Will's arc beyond the fact that her 'death' is mentioned. She will appear in the third arc, but (fair warning) while captor bonding is a thing and she is possibly a victim (that is not made very clear), I am not really a fan of her character or her actions. So be aware...

Coming up next weekend: Second Strike. Want to make a guess who will appear?

oOo

A soft knock sounded on his office door, too soft and too respectful for Jack who would hit the door as if he wanted to bash it in and too loud and too confident for the students who were even now afraid to disturb him during his office hours. Whoever it was, they were polite enough to wait for his permission so it was not one of the actual agents.

“Enter!” he shouted without looking up from his grading work. It was likely one of his colleagues or, he couldn’t stop the grimace that twitched over his face, Alana Bloom. They wouldn’t be bothered by him finishing the essay he was currently writing some especially scathing remarks on. For one, the arguments given on why this particular student believed the killer murdered only women was bordering on misogynism and, for another, plagiarism was just not done.

The door opened with a soft creaking noise, and it was closed gently with a equally soft click. He vaguely registered the tapping of solid soles on linoleum as it came closer with every step, until whoever it was stopped near his desk.

“Just sit wherever, I am nearly done,” he said distracted as he viciously circled yet another fallacy.
“Good afternoon Will,” came the familiar voice of the last person he wanted to speak to. He unconsciously tightened his grip on his red pen as his shoulders stiffened and he pressed his lips forcefully together.

He forced himself to relax and to continue his marking even as the older man made himself comfortable in his space. The sound of Lecter carefully moving one of his two chairs slightly, the rustling of his clothes as he unbuttoned his suitcoat and sat down, and the soft thumping sound of something hitting the floor was disrupting his concentration. For long moments it

was all he could concentrate on, until he forced himself to pay attention to the shallow arguments outlined in front of him.

It took him five, incredibly long, tortuous minutes before he finally finished assessing the essay. His irritation with both his visitor and the horrible quality of the written paper had mounted during those handful of minutes. He collected the pages back together, and with an especially sharp flourish wrote a low score at the top of the first page of the document, before he placed it upside down on the pile with graded essays. He placed his ballpoint down, leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest, his head and eyes still facing towards the stack of documents.

He breathed deeply for a couple of long seconds until he felt something close to relaxed again. It was only then that he allowed himself to look up and meet the eyes of his unwanted guest. He regretted the fact that he had taken off his dark-rimmed spectacles the moment he had entered his office all those hours ago. He might not need the clear glass to read, but they made a fine barrier between himself and rest of the world. The look in those amber eyes was something soft, achingly fond and yearning, and contained his visitor's particular brand of laughter.

"That essay must have been truly atrocious, for you to grade it as low as you did," the psychiatrist said amused.
"It was," he told him curtly, "but I doubt you are here to discuss the writing skills of my students, or the lack thereof."

"I was needed in the lab, I was informed you were to be found in your office, and decided to see how you are doing. I did mention that I will do whatever I can to make up for the grief I caused you," Lecter said warmly and the lines near his mouth and his eyes crinkled as he smiled before he told him appreciatingly, "you look good."

He had read his last letter, and the post script had indeed mentioned that he would drop by sometime soon if he did not respond. Which he hadn't as he had told him everything he felt was needed after he had ambushed him at the conference. Lecter might wish to be friends with him, but he was done with the other man. His betrayal of their friendship, the emotional and physical hurt he had caused him, and the callous murders of Beverly and Abigail he would have to carry around on his consciousness gave him enough of a reason to never even consider forgiving him, nor forgetting what he did. Turning the other cheek was a nice sentiment, but in reality it would never work. It would just lead to more pain and suffering for him.

It appeared as if the doctor couldn't accept that, and that he would indeed keep to the written promise he had made. But, not only had that letter arrived almost a week ago, it had clearly stated that he would *visit him* at his home, not his office. He had also believed him to be metaphorical.

He glared darkly at him in response. He was wearing the same cloths he had worn many times before, and it was far from the first time the well-dressed socialite saw him in the specific outfit he was currently wearing. He was quite sure he even had some stains from the tomato soup he had had for lunch on his dress shirt and that his hair was a complete mess of

tangles created by his own frustration at the inability of his students. He doubted that his current looks could be described as *good*.

In comparison, the Lithuanian looked as well put together as he had always appeared to him. Even when he had visited him in his cell after Brown had wounded him on his behalf, he had looked unfairly composed. His current outfit of a dark grey suit combined with a faintly yellow dress shirt and a navy blue tie made him seem approachable instead of ridiculous, even with his hair combed as severely as it was.

He glowered at the sheer injustice of it all, but he refused to remove his eyes from the soft but canny light brown ones taking him in. It had not exactly come as a surprise that of the two of them, the well put together doctor had not even counted as a suspect.

He uncrossed his arms, and placed his hands on his thighs before he flatly said, “what do you want?”
“I would like to apologise for my role in your decline in health and your subsequent incarceration, and to mend our relationship,” he answered him promptly, “I was truthful in my last letter to you: I will do anything needed to be welcomed back into your life as a positive element that enhances it.”

“Why?” he asked bluntly as he completely skipped over the first part of what the older man had said, “what do you get out of it?”
Hannibal opened his mouth to respond, but he barely managed to start his sentence before he was harshly interrupted by a loud knock immediately followed by the door being thrown open. The doctor’s face darkened immediately at the sheer rudeness of the gesture, but he sighed softly in relieve as he grabbed his spectacles and put them back on just before Jack Crawford entered the room.

Saved by the very case that had brought the psychiatrist to his office in the first place.

oOo

When he had started his drive home, he had believed that his day could not become any worse than it had already been.

The power had gone down multiple times over the course of the day and he hadn’t managed to finish even one of his presentations in the classes he had been teaching. When he had finally managed to leave the lecture hall, he had been told by one of his mentees that a fungus had somehow managed to grow on two of his experiments and that it had killed all of his rare, flesh eating beetles while they were still in their larva or pupa stage. The cherry on the absolute disastrous cake that was his day had been the fact that his car battery had been empty and though multiple of his colleagues were more than willing to help him out, it had still taken three attempts to get it started again. As he hadn’t even left his car lights on, it probably meant that he would have to replace the battery as soon as he was home if he wanted to be able to use his car the next day.

Only, his day became infinitely worse the moment he turned onto the gravel path leading to his house. Because, leaning with his back against the bonnet of the shiny, ludicrously

expensive, black car that should not be anywhere near his house, and lowering his face from where he had been staring at the darkened sky was Hannibal Lecter.

The noisy clatter of wheels on gravel easily drowned out the sudden heartbeat that sounded in his ears as he drove his car slowly towards the house. Why was he here? Why now? Hadn't he bothered him more than enough in the last couple of weeks? While the post script of the letter had stated that he would wait for him as long as needed, he hadn't really taken that serious as he had stopped by his office and lecture hall the last couple of times he had visited him and not at his house as he had written. He should have known better and he should have realised that Lecter would visit him at his place after some time had gone by.

The man was similar to a dog with a bone sometimes. It was cute when it was an actual dog, it wasn't so cute when it was a serial killer with stalker tendencies.

He parked his car, turned off the engine with a hesitant and begrudging turn of the key, and stepped out of his car. It was likely that no one knew Lecter was at his place, and he himself was unarmed and with no means to escape if he needed it as he doubted that his car engine would start now that it was turned off. His car battery had chosen the worst day to die on him.

The doctor's eyes just followed his form as he moved towards the trunk of his own car to grab his bag and coat. There might be something useful in there if he truly did need to protect himself. If not, he could always use them as a distraction and throw either of the items at him. He kept his keys in his hand the whole time, held in such a way that they might act as a weapon in case Lecter attacked him, and made sure he never turned his back on him.

"Good evening, Will," he greeted him as soon as they were level, "did you have a nice day?"

It was hard to get a good look at him due to the duskiness of night but he seemed to be dressed in his normal getup of an eccentrically colourful, three piece suit covered by a lightly coloured overcoat. He must have come here directly after he had closed his practice for the day.

His hands were resting on the bonnet of the car, and he appeared relaxed. It was hard to determine his state of mind, as the lack of light did not allow him to read the micro expressions that normally gave them away.

"Doctor Lecter," he said flatly as he slammed the trunk of his car closed with more force than was necessary. He didn't bother with an answer to his question, "to what do I owe this uninvited home visit?"
"I would like to talk to you without any interruptions, and to finally offer my apologies for everything I have done that caused you to suffer. Though I do not expect you to accept it at this moment in time, you deserve my complete focus as I deliver you a honest one," he told him, in a tone that could be described as almost earnestly had it been anyone else, "we were interrupted when I tried to offer my sincere apology in your office before, and I never managed to catch you alone since. I have since realised that it would have been a cheap effort after everything I did to you to offer you one during the hours you need to help form the impressionable minds of our youths. Hence the *uninvited home visit*. A visit that I hope to turn, once again, into the first of many, if you will allow it."

Lecter pushed away from his own car and took a step closer towards him. He flinched back slightly, and the psychiatrist stopped his approach and slowly raised his hands. The distance currently between them was the actual distance that gave him a fighting chance. Any closer, and the slightly larger, slightly heavier, and probably stronger man could easily take him down or out.

“I will not hurt or harm you,” he told him gently, as if he were a wild animal ready to bolt, “I promise you, I am here to talk. Nothing more.”
“Than talk, and talk fast,” he said with a grimace. He should have interrupted him before his long spiel, now he was stuck with the ponce, “I have had a lousy day, and I am really not in the mood for your bullshit.”

He could almost imagine the moue of discontent at his choice of words, but he really couldn’t bring himself to care. In the past he would have felt guilty, knowing exactly how much Lecter disliked crass language. Even now, he still sometimes caught himself using far more polite and far more cultivated manner of expressing himself. It seemed that the long day he had had brought him back to his default grumpiness, crass words included.

He just wanted to get into his house, grab a bite to eat and a beer to drink, change the battery of his car, pour himself a glass of whiskey and crash on the sofa with a nice book to read or bury himself underneath his dogs. He didn’t want to have to deal with someone he had once believed to be his friend. If he was honest with himself, the fact that he had once considered the man a friend was the only reason he was even listening to him now and not sending him away with scathing words.

Though he had some strong doubts concerning the man actually leaving him alone. His letters and messaged had shown that he was too tenacious to leave him be.

“May I come inside?” the Lithuanian asked him, “I brought you something to eat.”
He was about ready to open his mouth to tell him where to shove it, but he reconsidered. His dogs had already been left alone inside his house for too long and they *knew* he was nearby if the ruckus he could hear was an indication. He would also need the brightness of his lights to read the other man’s expressions.

He also didn’t want to deal with the doctor breaking into his house on another day or to have him still present in the morning.

“Fine,” he gritted out though clenched teeth, “but leave the food behind. I don’t care for your brand of pig.”
“It is completely vegetarian,” he was informed primly.
“Fine,” he repeated with a grimace. He didn’t believe a word he said, but he had to chose his battles. Though he didn’t like to waste food, he could always burn it at a latter moment.

He stomped towards his front door, unlocked it, and stepped aside so he would not be overrun by his joyful dogs. As always, some of them immediately ran into the grassy area to do their business or to stretch their legs, but some of the others greeted him and his unwelcome guest by pushing their cold noses against their hands first before they joined the rest of the pack.

He left them to it and walked inside. He dropped his bag, keys and jacket near the door and turned on the lights before he walked into the kitchen. He didn't check if the other man followed after him or not. He debated briefly if he would grab a knife so he had something more substantial to defend himself with, but decided against it. He took a glass out of the cupboard and a bottle of water out of his fridge and poured himself a glass. He leaned back against his counter as he drank from it and he watched on as the doctor made is way inside his home and looked around.

"You did not change anything when you came back home?" he asked him curiously as he placed his insulated bag down, removed his overcoat and hung it neatly on the coat rack. He stooped down to pick up his jacket, and hung it next to his own before he turned towards him. The corners of his eyes were slightly crinkled and an actual, genuine smile played around his mouth. He seemed to enjoy being in his home, and the look in those eyes was fond.

He shrugged, finished the last of his water and answered carelessly, "didn't see the need. Almost everything was still in a decent shape, just needed to be put back into their place and a good dusting."

He refilled his glass and placed it on the round table he so rarely used to eat from. He finally felt himself relax at least somewhat now that he was back home, inside his own space with his lovely dogs. It was only the presence of his uninvited and unwanted visitor that meant he could not relax fully. After some hesitation, he removed his glasses and placed them on the counter. The other man was already aware he did not truly need them, and they had been irritating him for a while now by digging into the bridge of his nose.

"Want something to drink?" he offered begrudgingly as he ran a hand through his hair. He might not like having him in his home, but he had been raised well enough and he had some manners.
"Water is fine, thank you," Hannibal told him as he picked up the food he had brought, moved towards the table to place it down in the middle, pulled out one of the chairs, unbuttoned his greyish-blue suit jacket, and sat down. He rolled his eyes as he poured him a glass of water. Everything was a show with the other man. The psychiatrist did not draw the chair closer to the table, however, though he did lean slightly forward and crossed one leg over the other.

He placed the second glass of water down in front of him, and sat down on the chair nearest to the kitchen. The one he did not have to pull out. Neither of them spoke as the Lithuanian studied him and he looked anywhere but at the doctor. He kept his glass in his hands, and turned it around and around to distract himself.

"I apologise for the pain and suffering I have caused you," the psychiatrist finally said frankly after long minutes of oppressive silence only broken by the sound of barks of playful dogs drifting in from the outside, "I will not apologise for the actions I have taken, as it would not be sincere and I promised not to lie to you, but I am honestly sorry for what it did to *you*. If I could go back in time, I would choose a different path so you would be spared from the misery and torment my direct and indirect interference in your health and your work has brought about."

He just nodded stiffly in response. He was not ready to forgive him and he doubted he would reach that moment any time soon.

Hannibal seemed to realise that he would not get a spoken response from him as he continued, seemingly honestly, “I am aware that you do not believe me, and your words at the symposium rang mostly true, with the exceptions of two points. I might have realised it too late, but I truly do regard you as being important without considering your worth as a special agent. Friendship might not be the correct word to encompass everything you mean to me, but it as good a start as any. You were never just a insignificant pawn in my games, nor were you my scapegoat.”

He clenched his hands around his glass until they turned white and he was quite sure his expression revealed his opinion about what had been said, but he kept his mouth shut. Engaging with him now would end up with him shouting and screaming, and he doubted that it would make him feel better. It would just scare the dogs, no matter how far they were currently physically removed from the situation.

“You are so much more than that. You are loyal, you are incredibly intelligent and can easily keep up with me no matter what subject I breach. You even surpass me on some topics, which I rarely experience,” he complimented him with a smile he could hear in his voice. He had yet to look at the other man, and he didn’t know how to reply to his words. Luckily, the psychiatrist didn’t seem to await a reaction from him.

“You are incredibly capable at anything you try your hand at, you can see the worst the world has to offer and still be kind, you are beautifully shaped and have lovely eyes, you are hard-working, you are forgiving of those who do not deserve it, among which I am aware I should count myself, and you are so very courageous,” Hannibal listed as he angled himself towards him, “your mind and the way you think and see the world is a marvel, true, but you are so much more than just that wonderfully, atypical brain.”

He snorted rudely and forced himself to look at him, just to make sure he could react in a timely manner if he were to physically reach out to him but the other man showed no intent to touch him. He was just gazing at him, his face open and showing more emotions than he had ever shown before. He still didn’t meet his eyes, however, nor did he respond. What could one even say to a declaration like that? He had not forgiven him. Wasn’t planning on doing so anytime soon either.

“Even at the height of encephalitis, you saw me for what I truly am and what I am capable of and you were not afraid. Even now, you are only wary but not *frightened*. You are a delight to know, my equal, and you are worth *everything*,” the Lithuanian added fervently, “you are a precious pearl surrounded by undeserving swine, who has always been treated with suspicion and disdain. My actions have not helped, I am aware.”

He gaped at him as he became more and more passionate while giving his apparently honest view on him. He was completely taken aback by his words and the tone they had been delivered in. He had known that the doctor was almost desperate to have his forgiveness, but this went beyond a wish to apologise or to restore a friendship. He had an inkling after he had called him ‘beautiful’ of all things, but the sheer tone in which he delivered his words in was what nailed it. That guy who had sent him to *jail*, the murderer of enough victims to reach

double digits, the psychiatrist who manipulated anyone around him as easily as breathing… *That guy* was completely and utterly *besotted*.

"I hurt you, and I betrayed your trust, but you were and are so much more than a piece to be played with," he told him, a strange, determined gleam in his eyes, "and I will do whatever I can to atone for the consequences of my actions. For the rest of my natural life, if that is what it takes to gain and keep your trust. Tell me what you need from me, and I will do it."

"If I wanted you to turn yourself in?" he asked sceptically as he finally forced himself to release the glass he held so tightly in his hands and meet those piercing, amber eyes. It would not do to destroy his glass and have to remove the splinters from his hands. He was quite sure the Lithuanian would *delight* in doing it for him too. The last part of what had been said was the only thing he knew how to react to. The rest was just too *perplexing*, "including all the evidence needed to put you away for life?"

The doctor uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, that odd gleam in his eyes intensified and the expression on his face became ardent and serious, "if it means that you would forgive me and if you promised me to visit me multiple times a week, I would. You would always know where to find me, and I have no doubt that I could escape if either of us ever required it."

He didn't know how to respond to what had been said. To *anything* that had been said up until now, really, if he was honest with himself. His mind felt sluggish from the day he had had and his current visitor and his strange mood didn't really help make it more clear. The last couple of minutes, and it could barely have been more than ten or fifteen minutes if he had to make a guess, had turned everything he had ever believed about the Lithuanian doctor upside down, and not necessarily in a good way. It also wearied him more than anything his already long and tiresome day had thrown at him.

"I would, if you asked it of me," Lecter said gently, but he didn't change his posture or hid the eager look on his face, "I would rather not, as I prefer my freedom and the ability to see you in all your glory, to talk to you, to laugh with you, to feed you the fruits of my labour, to walk your dogs with you, lavish the care you deserve on you and to generally be in your vicinity whenever I want or you want me near you, but I would."

"You are not even denying it," he whispered, still utterly flabbergasted.
"I promised you my complete and utter honesty," he was told solemnly, "and you will have it. However, I do not believe you will demand my surrender to dear uncle Jack. For one, it will not satisfy your thirst for vengeance or earn your forgiveness, but you would also miss the chase."

"You are completely crazy," he said disturbed and he leaned back as if to get as far away from the insanity spoken by the other as he could, "utterly bonkers."
"No, I am not," Hannibal deadpanned amused, "but I will do anything to have you willingly, happily, blissfully in my life. In any way you want to be there."

His chair screeched as he stood up to slam his hands flat on the table. The older man just smiled up at him, as if his anger and annoyance actually made him *happy*. He threw up his hands in disgust and started pacing along the length of his kitchen. The Lithuanian just watched him patiently, all his masks gone and his emotions visible for the world to see.

“Do you even hear yourself?” he finally asked agitated as he ran a hand through his already mussed hair, “you sound *obsessed*.”
“I would not go *that* far-,” Hannibal started to say in response.
“Not that far? NOT THAT FAR?!?” he whirled towards him and stabbed a finger his way, “what else would you call it? You keep on making promises you cannot keep, you try to contact me on a nearly daily basis, and your letters read like a freaking *love declaration*. You murdered Bev, you murdered Abigail, all so I could take the fall, and you just all but ask me to judge the worth of your *life* compared to all of your past and future victims. You all but asked me to *marry* you! After everything you did, you still believe you have an inkling of hope that I will forgive *you* and you *threaten* me with the fact that you will keep on bothering me until I do. How is that not obsessed?”

“People do crazy things when they are in love,” the doctor said with a small twitch of his shoulders, before he too stood. He did not button his suit jacket as he carefully moved closer towards him, as if he was a panicked animal easily startled. He kept his hands open at his sides the entire time and he stopped an actually safe distance away from him though he did round the table. He searched his eyes and face briefly before he resolutely kneeled down, completely uncaring for the dirt and hairs no doubt coating the floor or the cost, cut, or quality of his slacks and shoes. He lowered his buttocks on his heels, and placed his hands firmly on his knees.

He once again found himself gaping at the psychiatrist, his hand still raised slightly though his finger was no longer pointed towards the spot where he had been sitting.
“Anything,” he told him softly, almost reverently, as he gazed up at him, “whatever you demand. Just say the word.”

He couldn’t find anything to say, but he did manage to lower his arm absentmindedly. He had never even considered ending up in the, frankly bizarre, situation he currently found himself in. Long minutes went by in which he tried to recollect his thoughts and in which Hannibal looked up at him, unwaveringly and all emotions on display. He had no doubt that he would have *prostrated* himself in front of him if it hadn’t meant that he couldn’t look at him.

The psychiatrist was so very, obviously obsessed with him.

The weird whatever it was that was happening, was interrupted by the dogs streaming back inside, hungry for both food and attention. Their tails were wagging happily and cold noses were pressed to both him and the doctor still kneeling on the floor. It didn’t take long before he was surrounded on all sides by canines begging for attention.

Both his hands moved over velvety heads more out of trained instinct than actual intent, but the pleased snuffles did help him snap out of his stupor. It didn’t help him find the correct words for a situation such as the one he had found himself in, however and he opened and closed his mouth repeatedly as he floundered to find something to say.

He was not ready to forgive the man currently kneeling in front of him, but he was too emotionally and physically drained to get his mind to work.

“I- get out,” he finally managed to say dumbly, as he raised his hand away from Winston to rub the bridge of his own nose in vexation. His other hand was still petting the coarse scruff

of one of the other dogs, he hadn't really seen which. Hannibal hadn't responded to the questioning and questing noses pushing at him at all, nor had he grimaced as they got hair on his no doubt expensive suit.

It was not really what he wanted to say. It didn't communicate his anger, his confusion, or the sheer hurt the *bastard* kneeling on his floor had caused him. But it was something, and it would give him time. Time to consider the words spoken and what had not been said, time to think what it meant for him, and time he could spend *not* thinking. Preferably with the entire bottle of whiskey instead of just one glass. He was going to need it.

"GET OUT," he barked at him as the doctor didn't act beyond a slight tilt to his head. His dogs flinched away from him with a whine and he lowered his voice to a normal level as he told him jadedly, "Just, get out. I need to think. I am hungry, I am tired, I am utterly done with today, and I am not ready to accept your apology. If I am ever ready for that. So, leave."

"Of course," the Lithuanian psychiatrist said graciously after long moments before he slowly, mindful of the dogs, rose. He carefully picked his way towards him and stopped close enough near him that he could lower his hand to join him in stroking the dog that had returned to beg for pets. He had nowhere to go, surrounded by his dogs as he was. Any movement he might have made would have him hurt one of his lovely, precious companions and he would never lower himself to do *that*.

After two soft brushes over the soft fur, he gently took his hand in his own and brought it to his lips to place a soft, lingering kiss to the inside of his wrist. He didn't even seem to mind the no doubt heavy smell of wet dogs that lingered there.

He was too tired, too weary, and too done with both his guest and his day to pull his limp hand, now held loosely against a set of lips, away. Hi shoulders hung low and he was drooping slightly.

"Dear Will, do consider my words, please," Hannibal murmured almost lovingly as he released his hand and gently slid his own up his arm until he cupped the side of his face. His thumb lightly caressed his cheekbone, "I will come around on Sunday with fresh produce to cook for you."

With a quirk of his lips, he added, "vegetarian, I promise."

With a tender slide of long fingers over the side of his jaw, he lowered his hand and moved away from him. He took his overcoat from the rack but didn't pull it on. With one last lingering look at him, the older man opened the door, stepped outside, and closed it softly behind him.

He was left alone with his bone-deep exhaustion, his turmoil and his own confusing thoughts, his famished dogs, and the food Hannibal had left behind.

God, he needed that drink.

Second Strike: Pushing Boundaries

Chapter Notes

A short chapter with just some interaction between Will and Jack. Some elements mentioned here are actually important for the third arc... Enjoy!

Up next weekend: The cabin.

oOo

He had made his way down towards the office of the head of the Behavioural Science Unit as soon as he had finished looking through all the dossiers with cases unknown to him he had been given. He had been lucky, Jack Crawford had just turned the corner and there seemed nothing that immediately required his attention.

The older agent had been taken aback to see him, as he had made it very clear that he was no longer directly working for the BSU and that he would not drop by the laboratory or the morgue. He had been more than willing to listen, however, when he told him he needed to show him something that could help him with the Chesapeake Ripper case.

Which brought him to his current predicament.

“Just to make it very clear, I will not help you hunt down the Chesapeake Ripper, nor will I change my working hours or my conditions,” he said firmly as soon as Jack gestured for him to enter the room before him, “but I might have found something you can use.”
The dark-skinned man blinked in surprise at him, and he hesitated briefly to apparently collect himself mentally, before he closed the door and made his way over towards his desk.

He had already placed the file he had brought on the Jack’s dossier filled bureau and had started to remove the photos from between the written reports before other man had even reached the imposing piece of furniture. He ignored the chairs standing right in front of it, and leaned his weight slightly against the side of the desk.

“Of all the serial killer cases the FBI had to deal with since my imprisonment and subsequent discharge, there were eleven your team was requested to assist with,” he told him as soon as the man had sat down, “of those eleven cases, there were five which had a victim that showed a slight deviation from the signature and MO of the serial killer in question. These five.”

He handed him the images, before he moved away from the large table and into the empty space to pace.
“All five of these had a victim, in four cases the last victim even, whose remains or which crime scene showed or contained evidence that do not conform to what has been found at the

other victims," he lectured as he gestured towards the pictures, "let us start with the Muralist – James Gray. His last victim, the serial killer himself, did not only have the incorrect skin tone, but the timing of his death, the stitches that connected him to the other victims, the lack of resin and the missing parts do not correspond with the 47 other victims. One of your wandering zombies in the Beehive case was an older female, not an older man. She was not only lobotomised and missing her eyes, but she also had a kidney surgically removed. The last Tarot Tormentor victim, Lounds, is once again different. Cuts and stitches too neat, crime scene too clean, most removed parts present instead of missing…"

He trailed off and turned back towards the BSU head as the older man made a soft noise and said, somewhat sceptically, "you believe all of these to be the victim of copycats."
"Not copycats, just one," he said as he ran his hand through his hair, agitated by the tone of voice. He had forgotten how Crawford reacted when he was told something that didn't fit with the impression he had of something. It had been one of the many reasons why he hadn't been willing to return as a special agent after his release, "*The* Copycat."

"The Chesapeake Ripper," Jack breathed out as he reclined back, before he asked, "you are saying The Chesapeake Ripper killed, or brutalised in the case of Beehive case, all of these?"

He nodded sharply before he dropped down in one of the two chairs in front of the desks. He easily met the dark eyes when they looked up from the photos.
"Where is your evidence?" the agent sounded almost eager as he abruptly leaned forward, "and why hasn't anyone seen these inconsistencies?"
"Because the perpetrators were either already caught at the time, or were caught not too long after. No one cared to look for slight irregularities in the MO, let alone look into the difference in signature of the killer," he told him dryly, "four of the five killers are no longer around to disavow killing that additional victim and there was enough evidence to show the original killers were guilty beyond reasonable doubt."

Jack whistled through his teeth as he studied the pictures, "and your evidence?"
"Of these particular individuals being the victims of The Copycat Killer or against Lecter?" he asked him with a raised eyebrow, "because there is nothing to prove the latter, and quite some evidence to confirm the former."

"What is the use of this evidence if you can't even link it to Lecter?" the older man snapped at him.
"I didn't say that," he told him pointedly, "he was the consultant for all five cases, which gave him insider information. And-"
He paused and, for the first time since he had been freed from the Baltimore Hospital for the Criminal Insane, looked away from Jack's eyes.

"And?" the dark-skinned agent asked impatiently. His eyes snapped back up from where he had been staring unseeingly towards the piles of dossiers to glare at the other man.
"And Beverly might have found something on Gray's remains that was convincingly enough that she went after Lecter when I warned her against it," he said darkly, "I don't know what exactly she found, but she visited me to tell me about the missing kidney not long before she was murdered by the Chesapeake Ripper."

He hesitated once again before he continued, “Lass has also found something that brought her into the hands of the Ripper. Something triggered both women, they went and investigated something or someone on their own, and they must have found or be found by your white whale.”

Jack looked as if someone had slapped him before he said sourly, “neither left any notes behind.”
“You will need to look into the cases they were looking into,” he responded with a shrug, “Bev was collecting evidence from Gray’s body, but I don’t know if Lass remembers what she was looking into when she ran into her kidnapper.”

“Can you-?” the older agent started eagerly, but he lifted his hand.
“I will not help you hunt down the Chesapeake Ripper,” he repeated, once again firmly.

Jack opened his mouth to say something else, but a soft chime from a phone sounded before he could say anything. A check of his own phone showed that it was his alarm to remind him of the next class he had to teach.

“I need to go,” he told him as he stood from where he had been slouching on the chair, “I have added notes to the copies of the reports to explain why and how they deviate from the MO and the signature of the serial killer that took the blame. Zeller or Price might be able to get something from the bodies that might help.”

He made his way towards the door, but halted with his hand on the door handle as something came to mind.

“One more thing,” he said as he lowered his hand and turned partially back around towards him so he could look at him over his right shoulder, “are you still having dinner with Hannibal at his place?”
Jack looked taken aback, both at his continued presence and at his question.
“Every Wednesday if Bella can miss me,” he answered, before he added somewhat darkly, “which you would have known had you let me finish talking every single time I tried to invite you to go with me.”

He snorted inelegantly in response in response.
“Have you been in his kitchen while he was cooking, or at least near it?” he asked.
“I- a handful of times, yes,” he replied with a frown, “why are you asking?”

“He keeps his kitchen and the surrounding area incredibly clean, nearly sterile. Garbage of any kind is removed from his house as soon as he had a moment to throw it out and his garbage bins are placed as far away from the house as they can get and still be on his property. There are rarely any insects around them, so he must cover his garbage with talcum or baking soda or something similar,” he lectured him. As the head of a forensic institute he should have noticed this much, “but if you kill something or someone you will always miss some traces. Some drops of blood in the grit between the tiles, some viscera in the drains, some meat placed within parts of machinery that cannot be easily cleaned. Those traces might not be noticeable to us humans, but there is one specific phylum within the animal kingdom that will notice it and that will always appear: Arthropoda. Specifically, the insects within the Challiphoridae family.”

He turned fully towards the other man as he said seriously, “have you seen any blow flies at or near his place?”
The head of the BSU seemed deep in thought and a deep frown appeared on the marked forehead. He waited somewhat impatiently for his answer.
“Not that I can remember,” he was finally told.
“Next time you have dinner with him a couple of days after a body has dropped with the characteristics I have mentioned, look out for insects. Any type will do,” he said, “depending on where he has his murder room, you might see some of them. They are not hard evidence, but they might help.”

He shot a quick look at his watch, “and now I really need to leave. Good day.”

He turned back to the door, opened it and left. He walked away without giving Jack another change to say anything. He had already spent enough time on a case he wanted nothing to with as it was.

And he *still* hadn’t updated the slide decks for his lectures.

The Cabin

Chapter Notes

Remember the cabin mentioned in Hannibal's part? Well, here it is ;) Enjoy!

The chapter to be posted next week will be a direct follow-up from this one. However, I will not give you a title yet as that will give it away.

oOo

“If I take you up on that Montana cabin you keep pushing at me, will you leave me alone?” he nearly growled through into his phone. It was a miracle he hadn’t hung up yet. Hannibal had been bothering him about a get-away for ages, and it made him both incredibly wary and weary. It didn’t help that he had used an unknown number to contact him in the first place.

While he had agreed after a lot of begging and even more stalking to give the other man a chance to try and repair what he had destroyed in a figurative blaze of fire, they were still not even remotely close to being friends. He had blocked both of Hannibal’s phone numbers almost as soon as his mobile phone had been working again, and even after all these weeks of somewhat friendly contact he had yet to remove either of the blocks. He would interact with the Lithuanian when he appeared in his office in Quantico, he would respond to some of his mails if he felt like it or if the topics were interesting, but he did not feel like talking to him over the phone if he had a choice.

He was also still not willing to eat *anything* the man brought him. He could claim it was vegetarian all he wanted, he didn’t trust him not to add anything to it or to prepare the meals in the fatty parts taken from his victims or something equally devious. Any traces of human material that had survived the cooking process could easily be written down as coming from the person who made the dish, after all.

“What did you even do, buy it especially for me?” he asked after a long silence. He should have known that the obsessed doctor wouldn’t make a promise like that. As he had firmly stated that one of conditions of their further acquaintanceship was that the other man would always tell him the truth, he knew that he would never even hint at leaving him alone. Not even if it meant he would get his way.

He scrubbed his hand over his face tiredly. It had been a stressful couple of weeks. The semester had just ended a week ago, which meant that the students had been incredibly anxious prior to it. A new serial killer had also appeared on the scene, and he had spent his suddenly free office hours creating a profile in between marking his students’ exams and essays.

He had been working on grading said documents, at home, when Hannibal had called him and he was in desperate need of some time away from either teaching positions, and humans in general. Sadly, the Academic year was still ongoing, which meant he had a couple of weeks to go before he could even consider taking some days off.

“My dear Will, would you believe me if I told you that I did not?” Hannibal said teasingly, the amusement clear in his voice.
“No,” he answered flatly.
“I have had the cabin for years,” he told him easily, “when I first came to this continent to finish my medical studies, I also had some personal business in Canada to attend. I needed a base of operations near the border and the cabin was cheap and remote. I kept it for sentimental reasons when I pursued my career as a surgeon elsewhere in the States, and I had it renovated when I had enough money to do so. As I said in my letters, I let it to people who want to holiday in the area.”

He did not know how to respond to that. Hannibal had promised him that he would be honest with him, and that he would answer any questions he had as long as he asked them. In return, he had requested his presence in his life.

“Do I even want to know what that personal business was?” he deadpanned cynically, before he quickly added, “don’t answer that.”
Hannibal just chuckled warmly. He would have probably answered the question if he asked it, but he was just too tired and too done with the day to have to call Crawford and explain everything. He didn’t even know what to tell him. Ask him to check if his line was tapped? Would that even lead to actual evidence of a murder? What did it even say about him and his morals that he wasn’t even willing to get a confession from someone he knew was guilty of the death of multiple individuals.

He flopped back on his sofa with a long suffering groan. He let his unoccupied hand rest on his straining eyes. Maybe he should consider buying glasses with an actual prescription after all, or maybe he shouldn’t have agreed to give the sweet talking, egoistical doctor a chance to redeem himself in his eyes. The dogs that had yet to fall asleep looked up, and at least two of them whined softly at the sound. He softly shushed them.

“To answer your first question, Will,” Hannibal said, suddenly business like, “I will not contact you during your time there, you have my word that you will remain undisturbed. The current academic year has nearly ended and I have no doubt that you will have your educational tasks and experiments finished within the next two or three of weeks. Neither the university nor the academy will have any need for your presence in the month between the end of this academic year and the start of the next one. You need to rest and you deserve time away from the minds of killers uncle Jack has you delve into.”

He moved the phone away from his ear and looked flatly at it. With a snort of disgust he put it on speaker and threw it on the seat next to his head.

“That does not sound suspicious at all,” he said in response, “what do you get out of it?”
“My dearest companion, looking healthy and hale and nicely tanned. Those gorgeous slate grey eyes rested and intelligent, your mind sharp and dangerous,” Hannibal said oddly breathless, and he tuned his no doubt poetical description of him at his best out.

It was both flattering and uncomfortable to hear how incredibly *gone* the older man was on him. He was far from the first man to come onto him, but he had always acted as if he was unaware of the flirting as he had seen himself as straight but probably demisexual. That had more to do with the fact that he was so rarely interested in sex as it was, and not necessarily because he had been uninterested in experimenting.

He could not act as if he was oblivious *now*, as Hannibal was quite open about his feelings for him. While it was nice that someone would go to impossible lengths to have him in their life, it was also difficult to forget their history together and the pain the currently flattering Lithuanian had caused him. That, and the said impossible lengths might mean a bit more death and destruction than it meant for most people. Actually, considering some of the files he had read, there was no doubt about the death and destruction the older man would cause on his behalf.

“Careful there, doctor,” he interrupted the psychiatrist. He tried to hit teasingly, but it came out sounding awkward, “your obsession is showing.”
“My apologies,” he told him, and his tinny voice over the phone sounded contrite. He doubted the honesty of his tone, but was not willing to start another discussion about his devotion or his wish to get back into his good graces to mention it.

“Back to the cabin,” Hannibal said, suddenly all business-like, “shall I make sure that it is stocked and ready for you on the last Sunday of July? That should you give you a couple of days to get there. I assume you want to drive down to it?”

“I- yes, alright,” he said defeated, “will it be free by then? I don’t want to force anyone out or have someone’s reservation cancelled on my behalf.”
“Don’t worry Will, it will be empty,” the doctor promised him.
“Alright,” he repeated, “you sure you don’t want me to pay for my stay there?”

“My dear Will,” was said warmly in response.
He huffed out a weary sigh, “fine, have it your way. Just, whatever you are planning, leave me and mine out of it.”
“Your ship in the dark will be safe and secured during your absence,” Hannibal said fondly.

The rest of the short phone call was used to make the needed preparations, and Hannibal agreed to drop by the day before he would have to leave, without food or gifts, to hand over the keys.

That night, when he was cosily tucked into his bed and nearly asleep, he decided drowsily to give him the benefit of the doubt. For now.

It was only later on that he realised that Hannibal had never promised to leave him out of his planning. By then, it was far too late.

oOo

The cabin the doctor maintained in Montana was nice, roomy and surprisingly homey in a rustic way, but the environment around it was what made the trip worth the hassle. It was absolutely, breathtakingly beautiful.

The place was, as he had been promised, surrounded on all sides by woods and it was near a mountainous area. The stream meandering right next to the cabin led to a nice, clear lake filled with fish. There was another lodge located at the other side of the creek, but it was currently uninhabited.

Both he and his dogs loved it, and he spent three too short, delightful weeks walking his dogs, taking hikes, fishing, and swimming in the cold water when there was daylight and reading for his pleasure after it had become too dark for outdoor activities. His phone was turned off for the entire period he spent vacationing, and he had not brought his laptop.

Except for his dogs, there was no one around to demand anything from him. No horrifically treated, dead bodies he had to look at. No students that asked increasingly more foolish questions the longer they waited to finish the reading material he had given them and or to write the essays he had set for them. No doctors that wanted nothing more than to know how his brain ticked.

For the first time in what felt like *years*, he could finally relax fully.

He was therefore slightly mournful as he locked the door behind him for the last time on the Friday of his third week there and moved towards his packed car. He would miss the peace and quite of the place once he was back at his own home in Wolf Trap.

oOo

He turned on his phone during his last stop before they would be home again, only to look blankly in surprise at the device as it kept pinging with messages, voicemails and missed calls. Most of them were from Jack, but Alana, some of his fellow teachers within the FBI Academy and even *Zeller* and *Price* had tried to contact him. There was only one message from Hannibal, but as he *had* promised him that he would leave him be during his three week long retreat into the woods, it had been sent in the evening of the day he had left Montana. Technically, he hadn't broken his promise.

He had made sure that both the FBI Academy and the George Washington University were aware of his plans and location as he had not fully trusted the probably cannibalistic serial killer. But, as no FBI agents had destroyed the door of the cabin to get to him, he at least knew that he was not accused of yet another murder.

He, at random but hesitantly, opened the message thread from Price first. It didn't take long for his eyebrows to turn into a furrow before it turned into a sharp frown the more he read. He opened the thread from Jack next, and quickly scanned through the large amount of messages the agent had typed out.

Apparently, one or multiple individuals had dropped by his house sometime during the second week of his absence and had forced their way into said home to leave an unrecognisable, mutilated body behind. The maimed remains belonged to the heir to a meat packing company. Said heir had gone missing just a handful of days before, and by the damage to his house it had been determined that he had been held and tortured at least a couple of days at his place before he had been gruesomely slain.

As he had not followed the news during his self-chosen isolation in the woods, he had missed both the kidnapping and the subsequent mutilation.

The kidnapping of a semi-well known, rich individual, the dismemberment of the victim in an isolated, empty house with the owners gone on vacation, and the tool marks left behind, of course all matched to a currently active serial killer. Because it wasn't suspicious at all that someone he had never met before was mutilated and murdered in his house.

"Fucking Hannibal," he cursed softly. No need to grab the attention of anyone currently present on the car park. He had little doubt that it would be a *Copycat* case, and he believed he knew exactly how that individual had ended up at his place and who had done the murdering. He just didn't understand *why*.

It also explained the sheer amount of times Jack had tried to reach him, besides the obvious fact that it was *his house* that was used for the murder. He had been the one to bring the Copycat Killer to his attention, after all. The agent had most likely noticed the deviations he had described to him in his report and had drawn his own conclusions when confronted with them in this new case.

He turned back to the messages he had been sent and continued reading.

Conveniently, a cleaning lady hired by Hannibal to tidy his place once a week during his absence had found the blood bath. Just as conveniently, Hannibal had managed to convince the police and the FBI that they didn't have to contact him during his vacation as he truly didn't even know the victim.

Jack was especially grouchy about the fact that the psychiatrist had pointed out what had happened the last two times the FBI had dragged him into cases he had nothing to do with. That grouchiness might also have been caused by the fact that the good doctor had a seemingly solid alibi, if he read his complaints correctly. It was hard to determine which of the two statements had drawn his ire.

The rest of the agent's messages could be summarised in that he needed Will on the case, now, and that he needed to pick up his phone. Or else.
He was just surprised that Lecter hadn't informed the agent, or anyone else within the FBI, where he was.

Alana's thread told him the name of the victim at last, as he was at least in passing familiar with her girlfriend Margot Verger. Apparently the victim was her older brother, Mason, and he had the habit of being overbearing. The death of Margot's brother was not one to be mourned if he read her messages correctly, but she feared for her girlfriend's safety. Her last message was a very short, capitalised "CALL ME BEFORE YOU REACH HANNIBAL", which added confusion on top of the dread, betrayal, and horrible, sinking feeling similar to acceptance. He should have known something like this was going to happen.

Zeller had just sent him some photos of his house, and offered his awkward condolences as his home was currently both a crime scene, again, and parts of his ground floor at the very least were completely trashed and structurally no longer sound.

Most of his fellow teachers just asked if he was alright, and offered him their best wishes.

He had to take a deep breath before he finally felt himself capable of opening the last message, sent by the one person who might know the most of the entire situation. He was not looking forward to reading what the doctor had typed out.

Unsurprisingly, It was Hannibal's message that took the cake. It told him succinctly that he had talked to a handful of contractors in his stead and that he had signed the quotation that he believed would be the best fit. He would pay for it as he felt responsible, and he offered him one of his guest rooms in the meantime. His dogs were of course welcome, and he had made sure part of his garden had been made pet friendly so they could stay there. Jack had agreed on his behalf, so he wished him a save drive and if he could please call him as soon as he was nearly at his house.

"Fucking manipulative bastard!" he exclaimed, as he had hit his steering wheel had in frustration. That explained the why.

Cohabitation

Chapter Notes

Will's house is a crime scene, Hannibal screwed up... now what? Enjoy! ;)

Up next week, and the last chapter of Will's arc: Three Strikes Law.

Concerning the third instalment: I have finished about half of it, but I will probably start posting it sometime in October due to my upcoming vacation, the need to find a new place to live, and the fact that I have less time to write as my travel time to work has significantly increased. I will keep you guys updated, but do not expect it before October.

oOo

Sharing a place with someone else had always been awkward in his extremely limited experience.

When he had still lived with his father he had grown up and learned to live with another person close by in a space that was, at most, fifty square meters. His dad hadn't been a bad father, just an absent one. He made sure there was enough money to pay the rent and the bills, and to have food on the table. He also kept a little extra behind so Will could buy books, always secondhanded but in decent state, he needed for school.

During the day he had to go to school but he almost always came home to an empty house, appartement or trailer. He would make his homework, he cooked dinner out of cheap ingredients they had managed to buy, and he kept the often tiny place they stayed in as clean as he could. His dad would be home just in time for dinner, and he would be forced into uneasy conversations concerning his schooling, his interest and the lack thereof in girls, and the next job his old man had lined up. In the evening his father would drink a single glass of whatever alcoholic beverage he had, if he had managed to get his hands on one. In the weekends they would either go fish together, or his dad would take him along as an extra set of hands to fix whatever motor related work he managed to find. All his pocket money came from the earnings he himself made on those weekends.

That had been the extent of his father's care.

When he had gone to the George Washington University to study forensics, he had only had to share a room for a single semester. After that one semester, he had decided that he rather used the money he had gotten from the NOPD to rent a small room off-campus than to spent another minute with a much younger, immature fellow student.

He had had three roommates during that one semester. The first had barely lasted six weeks before he decided that being in college was too much work and he quite the university altogether. He had had the second kicked out of their shared room as he had kept large quantities of illegal drugs in his bedroom, had to be brought back to their place drunk nearly daily and at ungodly hours by loud, equally drunk friends who awakened everyone in the dorm, and had stolen significant amounts of money and valuables from him. He got the money back, but it had left a bad taste in his mouth. His third roommate was tolerable, but too interested in the opposite sex. He couldn't remember how often he had gotten back to their shared dorm room to find the other man having sex with yet another, always a young and new girl.

He hadn't managed to get on with a single one of them.

He hadn't cohabited since. He had had a couple of girlfriends over the years, but only one had lasted long enough that they went on holiday together. Their relationship hadn't survived the needed period of time to even start the discussion to move in together, however.

This was therefore the first time in over a decade that he shared a house with someone else. And it had to be Hannibal's *dwelling*, of all places.

oOo

Stubbornly, he had made his way over to his own house first, only to be greeted by a hive of activities as FBI agents, CSIs, and local police were busy with their respective jobs, all helmed by a loud, annoyed Jack Crawford. He was glad for the added protection of his glasses, as he really didn't want to have to deal with the full force of the somewhat bull-headed FBI agent hunting after his white whale without them as a barrier.

It had been about a week and a half since the murder had been committed, and he immediately realised that, while most of the obvious evidence had been found and processed, it was likely that they were looking for something they might have missed during the first check.

He was stopped before he could fully turn into his drive by two youngish police officers, who didn't quite know what to make of him. He was clearly not press, the dogs alone made that very obvious, but they couldn't fit him into the category of CSI or FBI agent either. Moreover, the prize of the house itself didn't quite match with the clothing he was wearing and the car he was driving. It took him showing his ID before he was allowed to make his way towards his house.

"Will!" Jack's aggravated shout greeted him as soon as he had opened his car door, "where have you been?"
The man made his way over towards him and had reached him by the time he had managed to both get out of his car without any of his canine companions escaping the confines of the vehicle and to close the car door without any paws, tails or noses getting hurt.

His dogs pressed their noses against the windows, clearly curious about the commotion they could hear, and the new scents they could smell. He wouldn't stay for long, as he needed to let them out soon.

“On holiday,” he deadpanned as he placed his hands in his jean pockets as he leaned back against his car to study the scene around his house, “which you would have known had you checked my agenda, or the out of office I had placed on my mailbox. Or if you had asked either HR, any of my fellow teachers, or Hannibal.”

The head of BSU opened his mouth to either tell him off going on holiday and turning off his phone, shout at him for it, or say something else loudly along those lines, but he didn’t give him the chance to say anything.
“Two questions before I start searching for a pet-friendly hotel to stay at,” he said firmly, “can anything be salvaged from whatever happened here, and when can I move back in?”

Jack had closed his mouth when he had been talking, but it became clear that he was undeterred by his questions and still very much irritated by his absence. A dark, pointed glare and a forceful repeat of his name halted him in his tracks in the way his inquiries hadn’t.

“It might take a while,” he was told stiffly, “we suspect that the victim has been killed by a copycat, *the* Copycat, so additional evidence needs to be collected. As you know, that might take a couple of days at the very least. The load-bearing walls were also damaged during the murder so, while it can be fixed, the contractor needs to come in and work their magic to make it liveable again.”

He rubbed his hand over his face, knocking his glasses askew as he went. Of course he would be locked out of his own home for at least *weeks*. Hannibal had planned it well. He just hoped that he could at least *see* the plans the contractor had written up and Hannibal had signed off on and paid for. It was *his* house, and while he would like to change some small things, the Lithuanian doctor’s idea of decoration and floor plans wasn’t the same as his.

He felt Jack’s calculating look more than he saw it, so it came as no surprise when the agent asked him slyly, “you could take a look and speed up the process.”
He shot him a flat look in return as he lowered his hands and straightened up from where he had been slouched against his car, “and endanger the investigation and subsequent court case? I don’t think so. Besides, I am officially still on holiday leave. Even if it hadn’t concerned my own house, I will *not* work for you outside the hours I have stated.”

His words clearly had an impact on the other man as his eyes narrowed and his mood turned from annoyance into heated anger. He saw himself once again forced to hastily start talking before the agent started a tirade.

“Can anything be salvaged?” he repeated annoyed as his own temper started to make an appearance. He had been driving since that morning and it was currently late afternoon. He wanted to unpack his cars, let his dogs run free, grab something to eat, and get some rest. He did *not* want to deal with the Guru’s disregard for his words and his wishes. Again.

“Everything that was still useable and not needed as evidence was given to Hannibal as you will be staying with him,” Jack said grudgingly. He balled his fists together hard enough to feel the pin pricks of his nails digging into the palms of his hands and pressed his lips together forcefully in fury. His nostrils flared out as he realised that he would need to go to Lecter’s place to get his possessions back.

“Disregarding that I really do not appreciate the fact that this has been decided without my input as if I am nothing more than a child or a pawn,” he ground out angrily between clenched teeth, “you want me to stay with the person we both suspect of being behind this murder?”
“Think of it like this,” the older FBI agent snarled back just as angrily as he stalked forward and into his space, having finally lost the battle with his patience and his temper, “you can finally do the job you are paid for and find me some evidence to put him behind bars.”

That, if nothing else, made his anger boil over into rage and he pushed the slightly taller man away from him. Jack stumbled away from him due to the force of the push, his eyes wide in surprise. It was obvious that he hadn’t expected the strength within his body, nor the loss of his temper. This was not the type of behaviour he had ever shown before.

He threw his car door open before the head of BSU could escalate the conversation even more. His dogs tried to exit the car, but a firm tsking sound made them behave. They could probably feel that their master wasn’t in the mood for disobedience.

“Consider this my resignation as a consultant for your cases, and my last warning towards you,” he told the now enraged FBI agent as his slid into the car, his voice was arctic cold, “I will mail HR as soon as I have finished my business with Lecter. Do *not* contact me again unless it is to tell me my house is released from your investigation.”

He slammed his car door closed, put his car in reverse and pushed the accelerator as flat as it could go. His car drove backwards with enough force and speed to make the gravel fly everywhere, leaving Jack and his forceful attempt to undermine him behind.

He stopped as soon as he was no longer visible from his house to put on his seatbelt and to calm his shocked dogs before he started on the hour long trip towards Baltimore and the house of the person who had caused all of the chaos he suddenly found himself in.

oOo

“Hi Will, had a nice vacation?”

“Oh yes, we are fine. Let’s catch up when we are both at Quantico, shall we? Here comes Margot.”

“Good afternoon Will. I would like to apologise for my part in what happened to your house.”

“Hmhm, I didn’t <u>know</u> this would happen, but indirectly I played part in it. Or at least, in the destruction of your house, not the mutilation of Mason.”

“Well, no, I am not too sorry about it. My brother was a… he was a menace. He actually threatened you and your dogs. You’ll have to ask doctor Lecter for the details.”

“He saw us together.”

“Yes, it was that simple, and in his mind, enough.”

“You know of my proclivities. However, I need a child with my DNA to be free of my brother. He saw us together a couple of times without Alana nearby.”

“You look a bit like her. Dark hair, greyish blue eyes, curly hair. In his twisted mind you probably fit the bill as the sperm donor. If we had a child together it would be half Verger and would at least somewhat look like my girlfriend.”

“Be glad you never met him.”

“No, Alana is not aware of my involvement. Nor does she know the details of my dear brother’s behaviour.”

“Yes well, I believe I have the right to be bitter. It doesn’t matter now. Give our regards to doctor Lecter.”

“Will do. Have a good evening.”

oOo

Lecter was waiting in the doorway into his house when he stepped out of his car. He was comfortably dressed in a white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up and grey slacks that probably went with a waistcoat and suit jacket he just wasn’t wearing at that moment in time. He couldn’t be sure though, as the outfit was covered by a white apron, showing that he had been busy in the kitchen. His ash-coloured hair had come loose from its usually neat coif and soft tufts fell into his eyes. His less than put together presence and the fact that he had clearly been waiting for him made his annoyance spike.

“Good evening, Will,” he greeted him warmly as soon as he carefully stepped out of the car to avoid any escape attempts from his dogs, “I hope you had a good trip?”
“Spare me the pleasantries,” he told him cooly, “I am only here for my items.”
His temper had cooled down after his phone call with Margot and during the drive over, but he was still irritated with everything and everyone involved, including himself.

Somewhere deep inside and very much against his own will, he had actually hoped that the doctor would finally keep his word. That he would finally stop his lies and his manipulations. While he now knew that the Lithuanian was not the only one to blame, it still meant he had broken his promise to him.

Rationally he knew that he couldn’t trust a single word the *esteemed* psychiatrist spoke or a single action he took. But emotionally he missed the person who had accepted him seemingly unconditionally and who seemed to care for him as a person. Someone, and not a dog for once, who seemed just happy to see him. Someone who cared enough to tell him to his face that the world could burn as long as he was alright. Sadly, that someone was a mass murdering, cannibalistic, sadistic serial killer who had hurt him beyond measure, who could not keep his promise once given, and who caused him a emotional whiplash every single time they spoke.

Lecter looked honestly taken aback, “I am sorry to hear that. Have you found somewhere to stay?”

“I will find something,” he grouched tiredly. The small amount of anger he had managed to gather within himself drained away to make place for a bone-deep wariness, “not that it is any of your business. You have done enough.”
“I apologise,” Lecter sounded contrite as he left his doorway and took some steps towards him. He came to a halt when he noticed him crossing his arms and his closed off expression, “I am aware I promised to keep your house safe during your absence, but my hand was forced.”

He glared darkly at him and opened his mouth to respond but the doctor was faster as he raised his hand to halt him.
“Will, please, you have had a long drive and a bothersome homecoming, partially because of me and my actions. Why don’t I show you where your canine companions can stretch their legs while you come in for your possessions,” he offered, “I will try and explain the best I can why your house is in the state it is. It does not excuse what happened, but it was never my intention to misuse your absence or the emptiness of your abode.”

He searched the Lithuanian’s dark eyes for a long while before he abruptly and reluctantly nodded once. While he would have preferred to get away as soon as he could, the doctor sadly enough had a point. His dogs had been in the car for too long already and needed, at the very least, to drink something. They had been trained well and were not likely to loose control of their bowels, but that didn’t mean that they should have to wait either. He would do a lot for the sake of the dogs that had never forsaken *him*.

He did not inform the doctor that he had already spoken to Margot Verger.

He turned back to his car and opened the backdoor nearest to him. The dogs immediately streamed out of the car with happy barks and they promptly started sniffing around the new environment. A sharp tsk stopped them from marking the unclaimed territory, and an equally sharp command made them heel.

Lecter had closed his front door in the meanwhile and had made his way over towards one of the sides of his ridiculously oversized house.
“Follow me, please,” Lecter said with a fond smile aimed at the dogs, “I had a part of my garden remodelled for their presence as soon as I was informed of the actual damages to your home. Some adjustments need to be made still for a comfortable stay for both them and for you, but it is habitable for pets for the time being.”

He moved after him as soon as he started walking, and a soft whistle made the dogs loop after them. He kept an eye on them to make sure they didn’t destroy or eat anything they shouldn’t.

It didn’t take long before they reached the fenced in, partially tiled area, and Hannibal opened the gate so the dogs could enter. The gate was closed as soon as all of the dogs had entered their temporary dwelling.

The wooden, darkly painted fence wasn’t very high or very thick, but tall enough that the dogs couldn’t jump over it and the wood was thick enough that they wouldn’t be able to easily chew or barrel through it. It enclosed an area about the size of his living room and a rough outline of a large doghouse had been built out of lacquered wood. Dog beds were

placed underneath the roofed kennel, and familiar bowls were placed nearby. Something that looked like a stone, oversized bird bath filled with water had been placed just outside of the kennel. There was a sandy area in the faraway corner, with a small bin and a small, metal cupboard next to it.

“The kennel needs to be finished, but they have a roof for now,” he was informed kindly, “I have food for them ready in my kitchen, water can be tapped for them from my outside faucet if the amount currently within the drinking bowl is not enough. Will you come in, please? Let me provide for them while I explain what happened?”

He glanced at his dogs and noted how at least half of them had already laid down on their respective beds, while the other half were either sniffing around their new environment or were drinking from the water basin.

“Fine,” he said begrudgingly. His dogs needed to be fed, they needed to be away from the car for a while, and they probably needed to do their business in a while. Their extended stay had nothing to do with the fact that he was at least partially but grudgingly curious to the excuses he would be given, and the reason why the psychiatrist had broken his word not long after he had made it very clear that he would always keep his promises. They had only recently settled their *difficulties* and started talking again after all, and he had yet to forgive the other man.

Hannibal shot him a small smile in response, before he collected all seven bowls and held them underneath one of his arms. He offered to take some of them from him as they were not exactly easy to handle, but he was waved away. He was guided towards the patio where his backdoor was located. When they reached it, he showed him where he could find the outside faucet if he needed it with a small indication of his head as he opened the door with his free hand.

“They are fine for now,” he told him with a shrug, “might give them some more with their food.”
The doctor just nodded, leaving the care of is dogs to him, before he gestured for him to enter his home first. He closed the door after himself as he too entered the house.

The backdoor let into a long but smallish room he had never been in before, with comfortable chairs and sofas, a dark, wooden tea table, and some completely filled bookcases covering one of the long walls. Two of the other walls contained large bay windows which were surrounded on both sides with classical paintings. The fourth wall, the one with the backdoor, he saw with a second glance, consisted of large floor to ceiling windows. The backdoor itself was actually one of a set of ceiling high French windows.

He followed the psychiatrist through his home until they reached a more familiar area that opened into the kitchen.
Hannibal showed him the large bag of kibble from an unfamiliar brand he hefted from one of the lower cupboards in his pantry immediately after entering the sterile, often-used heart of his residence.

“I hope this is fine for now?” he asked him, “I did not want to presume and feed you precious canines something I had made without knowing the recipe you normally use. This came

recommended by a veterinarian acquaintance."
He murmured his agreement after he quickly read through the ingredients. Together they filled the bowls and brought them back out towards the dogs.

"I am sorry I had to break my promise to you, dear Will," the Lithuanian said as soon as they had sat down within the small room from before, a small while later. He had been handed something sweet but non-alcoholic to drink and some crackers with cheeses had been placed on the tea table. He sounded honest and earnestly contrite, "I will spare you the details, for your own protection, and I ask that you let me finish my tale before you interrupt."

He nodded in agreement as he took as sip of his drink. It was likely that he wouldn't be shown towards his items before he had heard the story anyway. He begrudgingly felt like a complete pushover for the doctor.

"Thank you, Will," Hannibal said with a soft smile, "the short of it is that Macilla, my housekeeper for over a decade who I had asked to look after your place twice a week in your absence, called me at the end of your first week away to inform me that someone had stopped by your house to ask after you. When I stopped by the following Monday, your front- and backdoors had been forced open, the walls of your living room had been beset upon with what appeared to be a sledge hammer and defaced, and the rest of your house had been at the very least ransacked. The pictures of your dogs had been… *mutilated* in a clear threat and the carcass of a piglet had been left behind to rot."

He made a small noise in surprise. His house was not located in an area with high amounts of crime, and more often than not people had to actually know that there was a house to begin with to find it. He was not directly near one of the often used roads, and he only lived in Wolf Trap as a technicality.

"It was indeed a quite surprising sight to see, especially as the few things of worth had not been taken," the doctor said sympathetically before he continued, "I did not dare use the stairs as they had been partially destroyed and I worried for the structural integrity of the sections I could see. The vandalization of your living room combined with the brand on the piglet gave me enough information to determine the culprit, and the actions I took forthwith were based on what I knew of the American insurance requirements when it comes to damage to houses. It was not what I would have preferred, but it was the only thing I could do in face of what had happened on my watch. Margot was very willing to help me out."

He pushed the plates with the crackers towards him with a pointed look when he noticed that he had yet to eat one.

"The rest of the story you already know," he continued as soon as he had taken one with a suspicious sniff and eaten it, "Macilla found the remains a handful of days later, the police and FBI showed up, and the house was declared both a crime scene and a structural hazard. I had three companies offer me a quotation to renovate your home as soon as I was given the requested pictures, I signed the one that fit best with what I believed you would prefer, and I started the process to claim the expenses from your insurance company on your behalf. I apologise if I exceeded what you are comfortable with, and I once again offer you a room in my house for as long as you would like to stay."

“I want to see the quotation,” was all he could bring himself to utter in return. He was tired from the drive, from the stress brought on by both the messages he had received and Jack’s behaviour and by the emotional rollercoaster that the last couple of hours had turned out to be. And what did one say to someone who all but confirmed that they had *murdered* another person in your house as vengeance for forcing them to break their promise?

All in all, it wasn’t the best start to cohabitation and he hadn’t even spent the first night.

oOo

From what he had seen thus far, the house – mansion, manor, townhouse? – was ostentatious, and decorated with paintings, sculptures, vases, and even a samurai armour. All of which probably cost more than he made on a monthly basis. It was also incredibly clean and neat, and it reminded him vaguely of the museums he had been forced to visit with his high schools in his youth. Not the fun ones, but the ones that had guards that would glare at you if you showed any interest in the fancy artworks or where you were shouted at if you talked too loudly for their taste.

“Everything here has its own history,” Hannibal told him when he saw him watching the samurai armour in front of the master bedroom as he guided him towards the room that was to be his during his stay, “that one specifically belonged to my Japanese aunt’s family. I can tell you about her tomorrow, if you would like?”

He murmured his agreement but he was too tired to really respond. They had had a nice, vegetarian dinner and some excellent wine and he had started to become sleepy not long after finishing his food. The Lithuanian had taste-tested everything he had given him to show he hadn’t meddled with his food or his drinks, so he knew that his exhaustion came from the long day he had had and not from some kind of fast acting drug.
The doctor seemed to notice this, or he might have assumed as much, because he continued on towards the room he had in mind for him.

“This room had windows that look out over the area where your dogs are currently resting,” he was told kindly as soon as they had reached the intended door. He was shown inside but Hannibal stayed near the door, “It is yours for as long as you want it, even after your house is inhabitable again.”

A soft, fond smile was sent towards him as the doctor turned to leave, “you are a dear friend, Will, and I appreciate you just the way you are. While I know that you will never accept it, consider everything I have yours. Good night.”

He closed the room behind him and he could hear him move towards the stairs and towards the ground floor. He took off his shoes and jeans as soon as he was sure he would not return, and collapsed on the bed without bothering with brushing his teeth or washing up. He would deal with that later.

Though he was beyond tired, it still took quite some time before he managed to doze off.

His dogs were relegated to the small, fenced, pet friendly nook in the doctor’s garden and were not allowed in the house for obvious reasons he could get behind. While they had that

nicely roofed doghouse that fit all of them and kept them and their food and toys mostly dry, it also meant that he couldn't form a cuddle pile with them if he truly needed the comfort.

He would also have to walk them three times a day in the nearby dog park, and for the first time since he kept dogs, he would have to keep them leashed. Hannibal had offered to walk them for him any time he couldn't such as early in the mornings, and they would be fine where they were, but he missed having them near.

oOo

"Good morning, dear Will," he was greeted the moment he stepped into the kitchen, "I hope you slept well?"
The doctor turned his head slightly towards him from his spot at the counter where he had been working on or with some contraption and sent him a soft smile. From what he could see from the other, he was dressed casually in dark slacks, and a soft, well-loved, loose-fitting sweater that seemed too warm for the temperature outside. His sleeves were pulled up slightly to bare the lower half of his forearms and he wore an apron to keep his attire clean. His hair had been combed, but it hadn't been styled and it hung somewhat messily over his forehead.

As casual as the other's outfit was, it still left him feeling underdressed.

"Morning," he said in reply, "and I slept well enough."
"Are you still haunted by the nightmares of cases brought to you by Jack?" Hannibal asked him with a slight, concerned frown on his face. He turned away from whatever he had been doing to grab something from behind him before he moved towards him to hand him a glass of what appeared to be orange juice.

He shook his head as he accepted the drink. He folded both hands around the glass to give them something to do, "it was too silent."

The guest room he had been given was grand, in every sense of the word. It was large, airy and came with a walk in closet that already contained the clothes and shoes that had survived the bloody murder in his house unscathed. The walls were covered with a soft material instead of wallpaper in a calm light blue which had slightly darker fleur-de-lis stitched on it. There were two large French windows that nearly covered half of one of the walls that looked out over his playing dogs.

The furniture was made out of a light coloured, heavy, solid, fancily cut wood and consisted of a queen-sized bed and two bedside tables, a writing desk with matching but surprisingly comfortable chairs, a mirror setup of some kind, and some kind of fancy table which had a Chinese-style porcelain vase on it. The plush matrass, the blankets and the pillows were filled with down. The towels, the bedsheets and the curtains, while all made out of different materials, were thick, high-thread, and shaded in the same dark blue.

He didn't have to share the bathroom as Hannibal had his own connected to the master bedroom, and he was allowed to go anywhere he wanted to go in the large house, even the other man's bedroom. He was just asked to knock before he entered if the Lithuanian psychiatrist was inside the room and the door was closed. He had the run of the man's

precious kitchen, the heart of the house, as long as he cleaned up after himself. He was also enthusiastically encouraged to just ask for whatever he wanted to eat so the probably cannibalistic killer could make it for him. Under his watchful eye, if needed.

Hannibal had also made space for him on his desk in the study so he could work there if needed, and he had added a fancy, wooden table to one of the drawing rooms for him to use to tie his flies. He had even placed a strong light source nearby and brought in a ergonomic chair for him to use.

Everything was nice enough and it had been very thoughtful of him, but it wasn't his own home where he was surrounded by the sounds of his dogs and the woods around his house. The reason for his stay was also not one he wanted to consider either. His own house was currently a crime scene and needed renovation thanks to his *gracious* host and his former boss hoped that he would use his stay in casa Lecter to gather the needed evidence to put the good doctor behind bars.

No, he hadn't slept well at all.

"I am sorry to hear that," the doctor said with slightly downturned lips and eyebrows as he fully turned towards him, "is there anything you need to help? A white noise generator, perhaps?"
"It will be fine," he said with a shrug before he took a sip from his juice. As expected, it tasted nothing like the stuff he normally drank straight from the carton if he thought to buy it, "it's just something I need to get used to."

Hannibal hummed in response as he scanned his face searching for something only he knew, before he turned back towards the counter. He was served some fancy, open faced breakfast sandwiches not long after, with coffee and another glass of freshly squeezed orange juice to accompany the meal.

"I already walked your dogs for you," he told him conversationally in between dainty bites, "and they are fed and watered. Will you give me your recipe for their food so I can make sure they have it for their lunch?"

He gave a muffled, hummed affirmation in reply, too busy eating the sandwiches to allow for a proper one. The doctor seemed to take the agreement as it was meant, and he didn't appear to be disturbed by his behaviour.

"What are your plans for today?" he was asked as soon as he had finished eating, "or, to make the question more easily answerable, what were you planning on doing today if you were at home?"
"Washing my cloths, checking my mail and email, bringing you the key to the cabin," he shot the other man a wry smile as he finished his coffee, before he added with a shrug, "just, settling back in, I guess."
"You can use my washing machine and laundry detergent," Hannibal told him and he was offered another cup, "I can show you everything after we are done eating."
"Thanks," he said in response, both for the coffee and the use of his facilities.

He was led around the house after they had finished breakfast and the psychiatrist helped him with placing his cloths into the machine for the first load. He wrote down the recipe for his dog food and they made it between reloading the washing machine. They walked the dogs together around lunch time, and Hannibal cooked lunch for them while he hung whatever washing program had just finished to dry.

He checked and responded to his email in the afternoon, before he started on one of the many books the Lithuanian had laying around. Dinner was surprisingly simple but as delicious as everything the doctor had ever served him, and they walked the dogs again after they were finished washing up. The night was spent in the room he had been told was called a den, with good whisky and the book he had started on earlier that day.

Conversations throughout the day had been startlingly comfortable and flowed easily, without falling into the banal topics such as the weather. In the end, he had a surprisingly good first day.

The days after that first one followed a similar tendence of domesticity and he slotted easily into Hannibal's strange way of living. He easily fell in a rhythm that continued when he went back to work on the following Monday. His lunch and coffee was handed to him in the morning before he had to leave for Quantico on the Monday and Tuesday, and on the Thursday and Friday for Washington DC. He was lightly teased about the suddenly fancy lunches, but most of his colleagues knew what had happened to his place and were sympathetic about his overall plight.

Before he knew it, the first week of cohabitation with the fuzzy doctor had passed. His house was still a crime scene, and the renovation had been scheduled to start at the end of the new week.

It surprised him to realise that he nor his dogs hadn't been made to feel unwelcome even once, and that it hadn't felt awkward at all.

In fact, the cohabitation with Hannibal was strange, but mostly in a positive way. The doctor wasn't intrusive at all, but did request that he notified him if or when he wouldn't be able to dine at his house. He cleaned everything for or after him but his bedroom, but not obsessively so. He made him breakfast and dinner, and always offered to make him lunch and coffee after that first week but didn't push him if he told him no. He patiently walked all seven of his dogs if needed, without complaining even once about the hairs that had started to appear on whatever item of clothing he had been wearing that particular day.

It was all strangely domestic.

Three-Strikes Law

Chapter Notes

Last chapter of this arc! It ends in a cliff-hanger, but to be fair, so do the seasons of the show anyway. Enjoy!

To give myself some time between house-hunting, work, holidays and the like, the next arc will be posted from the last weekend of October onwards.

Three-strikes law

oOo

It was the third Wednesday of his cohabitation with Hannibal that he came face to face with Jack again. The doctor had planned to have his weekly dinners with Jack and Alana, and therefore Margot, again, starting that week as he was somewhat used to living with him. The doctor had made it very clear to him that this was his home now too and that he shouldn't feel pressured to join them.

He had been informed at the start of the very same week that the renovation of his own house was going to take longer than expected due to the sheer amount and extend of damage that had been done to the load baring walls, and that he might have to stay for at least another month with the psychiatrist. He had double checked to make sure that it really would take that long, as it sounded ridiculous, but materials were seemingly scarce and the weather did not allow for everything to dry in a timely manner.

As he had told Jack at his own house over a two and a half weeks ago, he had gone to the FBI Academy HR department that very first Monday and told them that he wanted to cancel his current consultation contract with the BSU. He informed them of what had taken place between the head of the Behavioural Science Unit and himself, and the harsh words that had been spoken. He had made it very clear that he no longer wanted to work for a leader who acted as Jack had, but that he was open for anyone else to contact them if they needed a consultant.

Jack hadn't bothered him since, so whatever HR had said to him had helped tremendously.

Alana had excused herself and Margot for that particular evening as they already had plans, so it would be just Hannibal, Jack and himself. Given that he really didn't want to deal with the head of BSU sending him pointed looks or glares over dinner or the jabs the two other men would exchange, he too had opted to eat elsewhere.

In this case, elsewhere was in the garden near his dogs. They were much nicer company than Jack Crawford could ever hope to be. Besides, Hannibal's outside table was placed in such a way that wind would not bother him while he ate, and the weather was nice enough that he didn't have to wear a jacket if he wore a sweater.

Hannibal had seemed disappointed when he informed him of his decision, but he accepted it readily with a soft smile and a promise to bring him the different courses and his drinks.

oOo

It was the sound of the doorbell ringing that brought him out of his concentration. He had been trying to finish one of the more decorative flies as a favour for Hannibal, as he had requested something nice to add to his décor, and he had lost himself in the project. He had no idea how much time had gone by since he had started, but the psychiatrist had told him when he had brought him a cup of tea to drink and some fancy, homemade chocolate cookies to snack on that he would come and get him before Jack would arrive. That had been some time ago, and while the doctor had occasionally appeared in the threshold of the opened door to check if he was alright and to compliment him on the beauty of the lure, he had mostly left him alone.

He bent back down to finish adding the last bit of material. He assumed that Hannibal would open the door for his visitor. Whoever it was, they were definitely not here for him. Only handful of people even knew he lived here, temporarily as it was, and not a single one of them was the visiting type. And if they were, they were more likely to visit Hannibal, or the both of them together, anyway.

It couldn't have been more than a couple of seconds later that the doorbell rang again. He lowered the tweezers he had been using slowly as he waited for the nimble steps of the doctor to reach the front door. Nothing came. He quickly glanced down at his watch, only to notice that it was too early for Jack to appear. Hannibal had told him that the older agent normally appeared around seven o'clock. It was currently barely past six.

He placed the tweezers and the bit of material he had planned on incorporating into the lure carefully on the table, stood up from where he had been sitting, and slowly made his way out of the drawing room he had been using and down towards the entrance. The bell rang a third time before he could reach the landing of the stairs, quickly followed by a fourth time as if whoever was on the other side was continuously pressing the bell, and Hannibal had still yet to appear.

He debated going to the kitchen before he opened the door as he could smell something cooking, but decided against it. Whoever was on the other side of the front door was incredibly impatient and it might take a while to search for Hannibal if the doctor wasn't, in fact, in the kitchen. Considering the fact that he had yet to react to the doorbell, he most likely wasn't.

He begrudgingly opened it by the time the visitor was pressing the doorbell for the fifth time, and was only slightly surprised to come face to face with Jack.

"*Finally*," the older man almost grunted out as he shouldered his way passed him and into the entrance hallway of the large house, "I have been waiting for *minutes* now."
"You *are* incredibly early," he pointed out as he closed the door behind the impatient agent, "I was upstairs and I have no idea where Hannibal is, which is why *he* didn't open the door for you."

"Good, then you can help me search," Jack said as he made his way deeper into the house. He had yet to remove his outer coat or his hat and it didn't seem like he was planning to do so anytime soon.
"Search for what, exactly?" he asked as he trailed after him. It was clear that Jack knew the way to the kitchen and that he expected to find whatever he hoped to discover there.

"Evidence, of course," he was informed in an irritated tone. It was clear to him that the older man didn't actually want to be in the house he considered the lair of a beast. He wanted to be with his Bella, the woman who was slowly dying from cancer, but he had no idea how to be there for her. So he grabbed the next best thing to deal with, the capture of his white whale: the Chesapeake Ripper. His incapability on both fronts made him ill-tempered, impatient with his people, and prone to impulsive actions, "the thing you should have been looking for the last couple of weeks. Instead, you are playing house with a suspected serial killer."
"Presumed," he corrected in a murmur, "and only because I told you to watch him."

They had reached the kitchen before the FBI agent had finished his sentence and he ignored or didn't hear what he had said. The doctor wasn't in the kitchen, as he had already guessed.

The door to the pantry was closed, but most of the ingredients for tonight's dinner were already laid out. There was even a pot on the large, fancy stove with its content already lazily bubbling away. It was whatever it contained that he had caught the scent of. Only the more temperature sensitive items like the fish were missing. Hannibal couldn't have gone far if he had left the stove on without warning him or asking him to keep an eye out for whatever it was that was simmering.

He made his way over towards the counter nearest to the stove and leaned against it. He crossed his arms and it cost him some effort not to hunch into himself. It made him highly uncomfortable to watch the head of the BSU move around the space as if he owned it. As if he had any right to be here and disturb the peace he had found while temporarily living with the psychiatrist. He wished he had worn his glasses.

"On what ground do you believe you will find something?" he said loudly as he watched the agent open the fridge first, followed by the freezer to peer inside them for long moments, before he moved to inspect the contents of the cupboards around the appliances, "any evidence I would have found wouldn't have gotten you far in court. Even now, you have no warrant so anything you might find cannot be used against Hannibal."
"You live here now," Jack told him absentmindedly as he moved towards the pantry, "your permission is enough."
"I am here as a guest, not as a resident," he informed him as the man opened the pantry to look inside, "my presence is legally not enough for you to use to search the premises the way you currently are."

The dark-skinned head of BSU turned towards him and said shrewdly, “but it is *enough* if you were to find something discriminating. You could have mentioned to me that you have seen something suspicious, which allows me to investigate.”

He opened his mouth to respond, but the soft, familiar tread of the owner of the house meant he didn’t have to. He closed his mouth again and gave up the fight with his own body and the awkwardness and guilt for the intrusion he felt. He hunched in on himself.

Hannibal entered the room barely seconds after he had heard his steps, and their eyes met for the briefest moment before he lowered them again and let them land anywhere but on the Lithuanian psychiatrist.

The doctor carried the large, currently empty tray he had been using for the dogs’ food underneath his left arm, which explained where he had been and why he hadn’t heard the insistent ringing of the doorbell. His sleeves were rolled up and his suit jacket was missing. He was wearing an apron over his light blue dress shirt and solid, dove-grey waistcoat.

His countenance appeared relaxed, but it was clear from the minute expressions he showed and the darkness in his eyes that he not only knew that Jack was present and didn’t approve of something concerning the dark-skinned man’s behaviour, he had also heard at least part of what they had been saying.

“Jack,” he greeted the other man neutrally, “you are early.”
Jack whirled around from where he had been studying the dried ham he had found in the pantry and he let himself study the other agent as he was fully focused on Hannibal.

“Doctor Lecter,” he greeted in return. He didn’t necessarily appear guilty about his actions, but he did appear to feel a complex layer of multiple emotions about the fact that he had been caught snooping. He didn’t want to look too closely and start emphasising with the FBI agent. The tension between the two men was already enough for him to deal with as it was.

“Yes, we were finishing up something in the labs and I was warned about some issues with the traffic between Quantico and Baltimore,” he fibbed with a brief smile, his eyes remained cool however, “so I decided to make my way here and risk being slightly early. The traffic wasn’t as bad as I was told, so slightly early became incredibly early.”

He laughed somewhat uncomfortably at the polite but closed-off look on Hannibal’s face he was met with. Jack might not have his skills in reading people, but he was experienced enough and good enough with people to know that he had overstepped. He was also aware enough to know that while there was only circumstantial evidence at best, the Lithuanian psychiatrist was *something* he should be wary of.

“I see,” was the soft-spoken response as the doctor made his way deeper into the kitchen. The agent moved away from the pantry as the other man neared him, and Hannibal closed the door firmly. The air in the room seemed to become heavier and more threatening the longer the silence lasted. It was very clear to him that the psychiatrist did *not* appreciate the breach of his privacy. He encouraged it from him for some reason, probably in the hope that he did stumble upon his murder cavern if he had one, but it was obvious that he considered it *rude* when Jack did it. Maybe because it was uninvited.

“I have yet to finish my dinner preparation,” Hannibal finally said after some long, tension-filled seconds had passed, “however, it is no issue for me to start on the appetisers. If you would please make your way to the dining room?”

Jack nodded once, and he turned slightly away from the doctor to follow the order presented as request. He was careful not to turn his back on the presumed serial killer.

He made to follow, even though he really didn’t want to be in the same room as his former boss, but Hannibal stopped him.

He turned back towards the doctor and truly met his eyes for the first time since he had entered the kitchen, the question likely clear within his own eyes. The psychiatrist’s face relaxed back into a genuine smile and his eyes softened as he gazed upon him. The man moved away from where he had been looming near the pantry and he deftly moved towards him until he was close enough to cup his left cheek gently within his right hand. His thumb lazily stroked his cheekbone and he let himself lean slightly into the touch. He seemed to enjoy touching him that way, as he took any opportunity given to do so.

“Ah Will, could you please examine Buster’s left hindleg for me?” he was asked gently, “he appears to favour it, but I am not familiar enough with him to judge if he is genuinely hurt or if he is trying to gain my sympathy and if his limping around on three legs and whining is therefore a way to beg for treats.”

He recognised the request for what it was, and with a thankful smile and a last, slight tilt of his head into the hand cradling the side of his face he murmured his agreement. Hannibal’s other hand came up to rest on his shoulder, and he squeezed lightly.

“I will make your excuses to Jack,” Hannibal told him softly, “I had hoped that he wouldn’t be made aware of your presence at my table tonight, but he forced my hand. I will make sure you are not disturbed by our guest.”

With one last squeeze he slowly let his hands glide away along respectively his arm and his face before he took a step back.

He muttered a quick thanks, before he made his way out of the kitchen, and escaped the heavy tension that had settled within the house.

He would finish the fly he had been tying at a later moment. Buster’s left hindleg couldn’t wait, after all.

oOo

The second time he ran into Jack that evening was when he had made his way inside to drop of his plate and cutlery after he had finished the main course. He knew that he could have just waited for Hannibal to bring his dessert, but he had wanted to get a glass of water and even after three weeks of the doctor waiting on him on hand and foot he still wasn’t used to someone doing everything *for* him.

The hallway leading towards the kitchen, which incidentally also contained the guest toilet, wasn't as empty as he had expected it to be when he reached it.

"There you are," Jack said scornfully as soon as he saw him, "I was wondering where you scurried off to. Lecter just gave me a bunch of excuses when I asked him."
"One of my dogs wasn't feeling too well," he informed him. It was a small lie as Buster had been completely fine and had been playing with the larger dogs without limping when he had reached the area. He still wasn't sure if Hannibal had been telling the truth as Buster actually had a habit of faking a limp for attention or gaining an actual limp because he had been foolish enough to challenge something bigger or stronger than he was, or if he had made it up so he had an excuse to stay away from Jack. He was thankful either way, and would forgive him this particular untruth if it was the latter, "I preferred to stay with them to make sure he wouldn't hurt himself."

The FBI agent snorted in something close to disgust, though he was sure it had more to do with his behaviour than his lack of care for his dogs. It was clear he didn't believe the reason for his absence he had been given.

"Anyway," he said briskly, "whose idea was it to make sure there was no meat on the menu for today?"
He gaped at him in response, and he had to shake his head and blink rapidly before he managed to actually make sense of what the man *wasn't* saying.
"Wha- are you *accusing* me of something?" he asked him surprised and at least somewhat hurt, though he couldn't help but feel like he should have seen this coming, "you believe that I *have* found some evidence but that I am withholding it from you and the FBI. You believe I have chosen my 'side' in what you perceive to be a game for some of the 'players'."
That last part had been stated as a fact. Jack had started to suspect *him* now as well.

"But for your information, Hannibal has been cooking vegetarian or pescetarian meals ever since he opened his house for me," he answered him somewhat snappishly as he glared at the slightly taller man's left cheekbone. He had yet to grab his glasses and he was regretting his decision to forgo them even after their last confrontation. He should have known that Jack wouldn't leave him be, "the only exceptions are whenever I was present when he bought the meat or whenever the meat is easily recognisable like chicken. Even my dogs get chicken. You looked into his fridge and into his freezer. You tell me what meat it contains."

"Ah Jack, there you are. I was wondering if something I served you was not quite agreeing with you," Hannibal's voice came from his left side. His mouth was turned upwards in a smile, but his dark eyes were flat and reptilian, "some prey have the tendency to strike back, even after we butchered or ate them. Fish is no better in that regard than any other land-based creature, though I had believed the ones dear Will provided for tonight were especially healthy specimens. I am glad to see I was correct in that regard."

He turned to Will, and his smile turned genuine and his eyes emotive, "I have yet had the opportunity to ask, but did you like what I did with the fish? It was the recipe I shared with you in one of my letters."
"It was good," he answered honestly, and he shot him as close to a smile as he could. He was sure his eyes conveyed both his honesty and his current dislike of the situation he had found

himself in. He felt uncomfortable with the heavy stare of Jack on him, probing away at him and his interaction with the Lithuanian psychiatrist.

“Lovely. It would be my absolute pleasure to have your aid with its preparation next time,” the foreigner told him delighted, “for now, let me take your dishware. I could use your assistance with the dessert if you are willing to act as my sous chef. Jack, if you do not mind returning to the dining room? I will join you in a couple of minutes with your last course. Unless you still need to use the bathroom?”

The part he had directed to Jack had been said briskly, and his eyes had turned cool again. Jack was fuming and still sending impatient and suspicious glares his way, but there was little he could do. He was a guest, and not present in an official capacity. Unless he actually saw a crime taking place, there was no action he could take beyond doing what the doctor commanded. He turned back around and stalked away towards the dining room.

“Thanks,” he told the doctor softly, before he scrubbed his free hand over his face tiredly, “I am starting to feel like a combination of a hunted criminal and a damsel in distress. This day is starting to feel surprisingly long if you consider the fact that it was my day off and I have been mainly working on that lure for you.”
“I am sorry to hear that I have played a part in making you feel that way, and it is completely understandable that it had drained you,” Hannibal said gently and at least somewhat apologetic. He studied him briefly, probably in concern of some kind, before he added surprisingly frostily, “I will make sure uncle Jack will leave you alone while you are here.”

He took a step closer towards him so he could take his dirty dishes from him, “join me in the kitchen? I would appreciate your presence for a little while, before you go back and enjoy the delightful weather outside.”

oOo

It was the dogs barking loudly that warned him something was wrong. He looked up from where he had been lazily lounging on a chair, reading one of the many books Hannibal had laying around, and just generally enjoying the silence and the last bit of sunlight that lit up the large garden. He had needed that bit of peace and quiet after the stressful couple of hours he had had.

He shushed his dogs absentmindedly as he watched the house curiously. His dogs wouldn’t bark their silly heads of over nothing. He had trained them to be better than that. It just wasn’t clear to him what, exactly, was going on and he wasn’t willing to go in to deal with Jack. Again.

It only took a handful of seconds before it became very suddenly, very clear what, exactly, was going on. It was introduced to him mainly by way of Jack jumping or falling through one of the large bay windows left of the French doors. The glass shattered upon impact and everything from large pieces to splinters of the sharp material landed everywhere in the area.

The dark-skinned agent appeared to be in a bad state. His clothing contained tears created by something sharp, his white dress shirt was bloody, his breathing was harsh and sounded wet,

his face contained shallow cuts created by the glass window he fell through, and his nose was broken.

The older man only realised that he had sprained or even broken one of his wrists and his left leg when he raised himself carefully but hurriedly from where he had fallen and tried to move away from the window. He immediately sank back down with a pain-filled cry as either his wrist and or his leg couldn't hold his weight. He tried again, and managed to get up gracelessly. He started to stumble away from the window he had gone through.

He didn't get very far before one of the large French doors was thrown open violently and Hannibal stalked out, his stride was economically and he carried a sharp chef's knife stained with blood in his right hand. Hannibal seemed to be better off than Jack was, but he too was dishevelled and at least slightly wounded. His bottom lip and his right eyebrow were split, but he couldn't see anything else physically wrong with him. The only traces of blood on his dishevelled cloths came from Jack or the knife.

The doctor's eyes and face were without the polite mask he normally donned when in company. While his eyes showed the cold, predatory calculation of a raptor stalking its prey, the rest of his face was creased in a snarl of unadulterated, black rage for everyone to see. It was likely that rage that had given Hannibal, strong and powerful though he might be, the edge over the heavily trained former soldier turned FBI agent.

It was the sound of the dogs barking and whining that alerted or reminded both men that they were not alone, but it was only Jack that turned towards him. The look in his eyes was pleading with him to help him out, even though he had alleged him not hours before of being in collusion with the serial killer currently pursuing him. It was that look that reminded *him* that he should be doing something.

He just didn't know what to do. His own morality, his own view of what was right and what was wrong kept him frozen into his seat. He didn't even *know* what had triggered the fight. The food he had been served had been fully vegetarian after all, as Jack had remarked upon just before he had falsely accused him, with the exception of the main course which contained freshly caught trout.

Though Hannibal would have gladly informed him of his transgressions, he had never asked and he had therefore only circumstantial evidence and his own firm believe of the other man's guilt at best. Jack, on the other hand, was directly and indirectly just as guilty of the death of at least a handful of people in his own way.

While it was clear that Hannibal had dropped any pretence of being the civilised, polished psychiatrist, that didn't actually have to mean anything. Anyone could break when the correct pressure points were hit.

It never once occurred to him that he, out of everyone currently present, wasn't even armed. Hannibal had his incredibly sharp knife. Jack used to have a gun, though he seemed to have lost it sometimes during the fight, and was currently grasping for one of the many larger pieces of glass in his already bleeding hand. He had to release quickly enough as it made the state of his hand worse, but he could pick up a new one if needed. While he? He had nothing

that he could use as a weapon, not within his reach. Not even the knife he had used to cut his food, as he had brought it inside a while ago.

It was his hesitation within those few, precious seconds that saw the fight ended. Jack, with all the skills and training of a former soldier, scrambled away from the experienced predator hunting him to create some distance he could use against him but the Lithuanian doctor was faster. He almost *leaped* forwards and into the space of the dark-skinned agent. Jack threw out a fist in a clear attempt to hit a weak spot, but while he hit Hannibal's left side it didn't seem to do much to stop the other man. Hannibal just whirled around and behind him and, in a move that could be classed as elegant were it executed in anything but a fight to the death, he arced the knife and buried it deeply in Jack's right shoulder.

He released it immediately and lifted both hands to grab the FBI agent's neck between them. He wrenched it forcefully to the left and, with a loud crack, he broke it. He dropped the body immediately and just stood there, motionless, watching the remains of his adversary as blood slowly spread around what had once been a celebrated FBI agent.

The doctor finally breathed out heavily and turned towards him. His eyes still simmered with that same black rage, but they had softened significantly the moment they alighted upon his prone figure and his posture had become relaxed and open.

The entire part of the fight he had seen had lasted only seconds, but it had left him reeling in the lounge chair. He finally had the evidence needed to have Hannibal Lecter arrested for the death of at least one individual, which meant that they could search his house for evidence. He could make a dash for the mobile phone he had left inside. The Lithuanian would probably let him, too.

"I am sorry you had to see that," Hannibal said after an unknown amount of time had gone by in which they just *stared* at each other. He wiped his left hand over his split lip and looked briefly down at the blood staining said hand before he met his eyes again. The anger slowly bled away from his gaze and countenance to make place for the ever present adoration that was always there when he looked at him, though it was currently mixed with honest regret, "I would have liked to spare you the sight of his death, if only for the fondness you used to feel towards him in the past."

The dogs were still barking, but they had calmed down significantly now that the peace and quiet had returned. Their tails were wagging happily and they appeared curious about the heavy smell of blood tainting the air.

"What set you off?" he finally asked him for lack of anything better to ask or do.
"You," Hannibal answered him easily, his voice and gaze steady. He blinked in surprise at his answer as he couldn't remember having done anything beyond the topics he had been discussing earlier with Jack. He eyed the other man warily and straightened in his chair in case he would attack him. Hannibal seemed content to just stand there and look at him, however, the blood on his hands and his clothing congealing and the wounds on his face steadily oozing liquid, "Jack made some allusions about you. My actions might have been… *Impulsive* in response. Agent Crawford reacted."

“Ah,” was all he managed to get out at that. What did one even say or do when one was told that person a killed person b because of something they *said*? No, he actually knew what someone else would do. Panic, start shouting, and call for help or the police. He, however, had never been normal.

“Now what?” he said after long moments had passed again. An actual small puddle of blood had slowly started to form around Jack’s body, but the knife in his shoulder kept most of the blood still inside him.
“You tell me,” was Hannibal’s satisfied reaction, “what do *you* want to do?”

He narrowed his eyes in a combination of anger and frustration, the first time he actually felt something beyond blank shock, “you are enjoying this.”
“I always enjoy watching your mind at work,” was the honest answer, his tone of voice filled with delight, “but I especially appreciate the fact that, due to unforeseen circumstances, you are forced to take action. You have been playing it safe for too long.”

That made him finally stand up from his chair with a scowl of outrage on his face. He stalked forward so he could glare up at the slightly larger man. He was the second person that same day who was talking about sides, however indirectly, and him playing it safe.

“Not in the sense you seem to take my words,” Hannibal said gently as he slowly raised a hand to cup his cheek. Neither cared about the blood still staining the hand and being transferred to his facial hair. He stepped back and away from him, and his hand fell down to rest at his side, “but in the manner of what you want to accept from me, what you want to do with me. You know what I am, you know what I am capable of. You have for a while now but you only had circumstantial evidence at best. Here is all the confirmation you need to have me locked away in a cage like you have been. Like I have caused you to be, until I had you released.”

He felt how his snarl grew more pronounced at the admission of guilt, both for the murders but also for his incarceration. The delighted smile on the absolute bastard’s face, however, turned the snarl into an equally heavy scowl of discontent. He was clearly enjoying the entire situation.

The doctor took a step forwards, back into his space, and raised both his hands to rest them on his shoulders. He slowly slid them away from his shoulders and onto his back and pulled him closer in a loose embrace, uncaring of any wounds or bruises he might have gained during the fight. He turned his head in time to escape having his nose squashed into the other man’s shoulder, but it meant that his face was tucked where shoulder met neck.

“You are manipulating me,” he told him with a grimace muffled by the unkempt dress shirt and waistcoat pressed against his mouth, “trying to force me to choose your side.”
“Not at all,” he was told, and he shivered as a strong hand slowly caressed down his spine, “though I hope your choice leaves me free and near you, as I have told you before, I just wish to hold you close in case you choose to walk away now. If there are any sides to speak of, consider me on *yours*, not the other way around.”

The doctor leaned back a bit and removed the hand holding his hip to place its fingers tenderly underneath his chin to tip it up. Their eyes met, and he was struck dumb by the

wealth of emotions swimming in those dark eyes.

“I apologise in advanced for this,” he murmured softly as his hand moved away from his chin, upwards to cup his cheek for a long, lingering moment before it continued its path until he had buried his hand into his hair and was tenderly holding the back of his head.

“Wha-,” was all he could say before Hannibal used the hand in his hair to gently tilt his head slightly and moved his own head forwards. He briefly rubbed the side of his nose against his in a playful gesture before he firmly pressed their mouths together.

oOo

Will’s house was sold surprisingly quickly for the state it was in, and without him needing to do a thing or him ever meeting the new habitants. The buyers were more than happy to wait until it was completely renovated and everything was handled through the realtor.

The money was put into a special account and set aside. It was enough for him to start over somewhere else. The few items worth saving were removed from the house and temporarily stored. He would get them moved towards his new home at a later moment.

His dogs were loaded into the back of his car, they were panting happily and excited to go wherever he was bringing them. With one last look towards the house that used to be his safe harbour, he stepped into the car.

He was ready to leave it all behind and start anew.

End Notes

I have already started on the third instalment of this set, but as I recently started a new job, need to find a new place to live nearby said new job, and I have a holiday coming up in August/ September.... It might take a while to finish the third piece. I will keep you updated during my posting of this instalment.

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